

TOOLKIT #7

The One-Page Board Memo

Write decision memos for boards and CEOs that put the answer first and fit on one page.

A Lever & Core toolkit

Drawing on Barbara Minto (The Pyramid Principle)

Every complex organization is inherently simple.

01 · WHAT IT IS

Lead with the answer. Give the board one page they can decide on.

Board members and CEOs read papers quickly, often minutes before a meeting. A memo that builds slowly toward its point loses them. This toolkit shows how to put the decision first and organize everything else beneath it.

What it is

A method for writing short decision memos: papers that ask a board, committee or chief executive to approve, choose or note something.

It has two parts. An **opening** sets up the question in three moves: situation, complication, question. A **pyramid** then answers it: the recommendation at the top, a few key reasons beneath it, and evidence beneath each reason.

Readers get the point in the first paragraph and can go as deep as they need.

When to use it

- Board papers that ask for an approval or a choice.
- A recommendation to your CEO or executive director.
- Budget, program or hiring decisions.
- Responding quickly to a crisis or a funder's request.
- Pre-reads for a strategy day or committee meeting.

You walk away with

- A one-page memo template
- A clear, specific decision request
- Reasons grouped and stated as sentences
- Risks and alternatives in their place
- A quick test to run before you send

At a glance

45–60 minutes for your first memo; much less once it becomes habit.

One page, plus an optional appendix for detail.

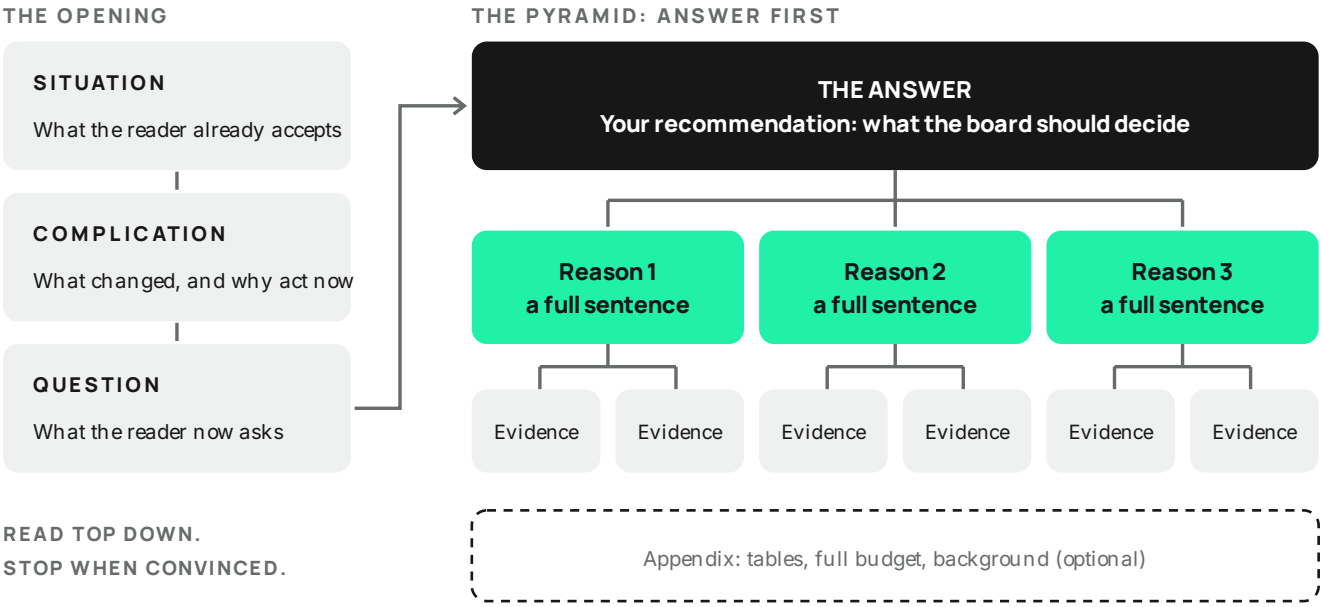
Works with any board pack, email or shared document.

Source. The situation–complication–question opening and the answer-first pyramid come from Barbara Minto's work on structured business writing, set out in her book *The Pyramid Principle*. This toolkit is an original adaptation by Lever & Core for boards and leaders of mission-driven organizations.

02 · THE FRAMEWORK

Set up the question, then build the pyramid

The opening takes the reader from what they already accept to the question your memo answers. The pyramid then answers it, from the top down.



Situation

Context the reader already knows and agrees with. Stable and uncontroversial. One or two sentences, no history lesson.

Complication

What has changed or gone wrong, and why it creates a need to act now.

Question

The question the complication raises in the reader's mind. Often left unstated in the final memo, but always written down first, to check your answer fits.

The answer

Your recommendation, stated in full at the top: what you want decided, and by when.

Key reasons

Usually three. Each one a full sentence, not a topic label. They do not overlap, and together they leave out nothing important.

Evidence

Facts you can source, options you considered, risks and how you will manage them. Long detail moves to an appendix.

> **The one test that matters.** If a board member read only your first paragraph, would they know what you are asking for, and why?