

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.

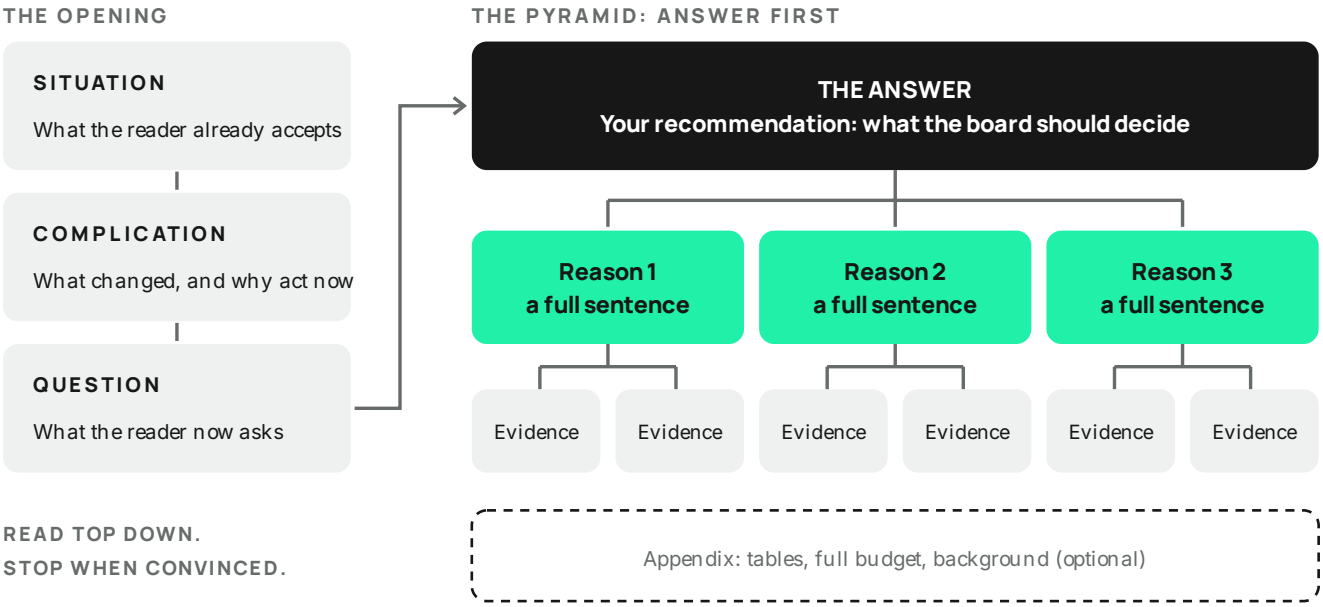
Works with any board pack, email or shared document.

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?

03 · STEP BY STEP

Writing the memo

1

Write the decision first

Before drafting anything, write one line: the decision you need. Approve, choose or note?

Ask: What exactly do we want the board to do after reading this?

2

Draft the answer

Write your recommendation as one sentence a board member could repeat. If you cannot, you are not ready to write the memo yet.

3

Build the opening

Situation, complication, question: one or two sentences each. Check that the question leads straight to your answer.

Ask: Would the board agree with the situation without debate?

4

Group the reasons

List everything that supports the answer, then sort it into about three groups. Give each group a sentence that states the point, not just the topic: “The pilot uses suppliers we already work with”, not “Operations”.

5

Add evidence, move detail out

Under each reason, two or three supporting facts. Anything longer goes to an appendix: tables, full budgets, background.

6

Name the risks and the alternative

State the main risks and how you will manage them, what happens if the board says no or defers, and the exact wording of the resolution you are asking for.

7

Test it in two minutes

Give the memo to a colleague for two minutes, then ask them to tell you the ask and the reasons. Cut or fix anything that did not help them.

> **Headings that work.** Replace “Background”, “Finances” and “Next steps” with sentences that carry the message. A board member skimming only the headings should still get your argument.

04 · WORKED EXAMPLE

A decision on a second program site

TYPICAL SCENARIO

A composite situation that shows the pattern. It is not a client and does not describe any real organization.

BEFORE	The director of a food-security NGO wants approval to open a second community kitchen. Her first draft runs to four pages of history, and the request appears on the last one.
SITUATION	Our kitchen in the east district runs at full capacity and the program is stable and well supported by volunteers.
COMPLICATION	A neighbouring district has lost its regular food support since another provider closed, and families from there are already travelling to us. A local foundation has offered start-up funding if we apply this quarter.
QUESTION not printed in the memo	Should we open a second site, and on what terms?
ANSWER	**Approve a twelve-month pilot of a second site, funded by the foundation's start-up grant, with a board go / no-go review in month nine.**
REASON 1	The need is real and close: families from the district are already coming to our existing kitchen.
REASON 2	The risk is contained: the grant covers start-up costs, and the pilot uses our existing suppliers and volunteer model.
REASON 3	The board keeps control: the month-nine review lets it stop or adjust before any long-term commitment.
APPENDIX	Draft pilot budget · site options considered · risk register · draft resolution.

> **What changes:** the board sees the decision in the first paragraph, so the meeting can be spent on the terms of the pilot instead of reconstructing the argument.

05 · WORKSHEET

One-page memo builder

To _____ From _____ Date _____ Decision needed by _____

DECISION REQUESTED

☐ Approve ☐ Choose between options ☐ Note / for information · In one line:

S SITUATION

What the reader already accepts.

C COMPLICATION

What changed; why act now.

Q QUESTION

What the reader now asks (to check the answer fits).

A OUR RECOMMENDATION, IN ONE SENTENCE

What should be decided, and by when? Would a board member be able to repeat it?

1 REASON 1

A full sentence, then the evidence.

2 REASON 2

A full sentence, then the evidence.

3 REASON 3

A full sentence, then the evidence.

! RISKS AND HOW WE MANAGE THEM

And what happens if the board says no or defers.

+ APPENDIX AND RESOLUTION WORDING

What moves to the back; the exact words to approve.

06 · FOR THE FACILITATOR

Tips and common mistakes

Use this with senior staff who write board papers, or with a board that wants better papers. Practise on a real, upcoming decision.

Facilitator tips

Answer first, then write

Ask each writer to say their recommendation out loud in one sentence before they open a document. Most unclear memos come from unclear decisions.

One memo, one decision

If a paper asks for three unrelated decisions, split it. Each decision deserves its own top line.

Put numbers in context

Every figure should answer "compared with what?": last year, the budget, the alternative.

Make "no" a real option

Say plainly what happens if the board declines or defers. It builds trust and helps the board decide.

Swap and test

In a workshop, pairs swap drafts and have two minutes to state each other's ask and reasons.

Common mistakes

The history lesson

Pages of background before the point. The board needs only enough context to accept the situation.

Topic headings

"Background", "Finances", "Risks" tell the reader where they are, not what you think.

Burying the ask

A request on the last page invites the board to redesign the proposal in the meeting.

Options without a view

Listing options is useful; refusing to recommend one is not. Say which you prefer, and why.

Too many reasons

More than four usually means some belong together. Group them until each reason stands on its own.

The memo skeleton

To · From · Date · Decision needed by → **Decision requested and recommendation** (first paragraph) → situation and complication (two to four sentences) → three reasons, each with its evidence → risks and the alternative → resolution wording → appendix.

Before you send: the ask is in the first paragraph · it fits on one page · every reason is a full sentence with evidence beneath it · risks and the alternative are named · the resolution wording is included.

Want help running this with your team?

Lever & Core — Uriel Edery

We help NGOs and mission-driven organizations find the few things that really limit their impact, and build simple, focused ways of working around them.

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