Inverted Pyramid

A method of information presentation in which information is presented in descending order of importance.

The inverted pyramid refers to a method of information presentation in which critical information is presented first, and then additional elaborative information is presented in descending order of importance. In the pyramid metaphor, the broad base of the pyramid represents the least important information, while the tip of the pyramid represents the most important information. For example, in traditional scientific writing, a historical foundation (tip of the pyramid) is presented first, followed by arguments and evidence, and then a conclusion (base of the pyramid). To invert the pyramid is to present the important information first, and the background information last. The inverted pyramid has been a standard in journalism for over one hundred years, and has found wide use in instructional design, technical writing, and Internet publishing. ¹

The inverted pyramid consists of a lead (critical information) and a body (elaborative information). The lead is a terse summary of the “what,” “where,” “when,” “who,” “why,” and “how” of the information. The body consists of subsequent paragraphs or chunks of information that elaborate facts and details in descending order of importance. It is increasingly common in Internet publishing to present only the lead, and make the body available upon request (e.g., with a “more…” link).

The inverted pyramid offers a number of benefits over traditional methods of information presentation: it conveys the key aspects of the information quickly; it establishes a context in which to interpret subsequent facts; initial chunks of information are more likely to be remembered than later chunks of information; it permits efficient searching and scanning of information; and information can be easily edited for length, knowing that the least important information will always be at the end. The efficiency of the inverted pyramid is also its limiting factor. While it provides a succinct, information-dense method of information presentation, the inverted pyramid does not allow the flexibility of building suspense or creating a surprise ending, so is often perceived as uninteresting and boring.

Use the inverted pyramid when presentation efficiency is important. Develop leads that present a concise overview of the information, followed by short chunks of information of decreasing importance. If interestingness is important and has been compromised, include multiple media, interesting layouts, and interactivity to complement the information and actively engage audiences. When it is not possible to use the inverted pyramid method (e.g., in standard scientific writing), consider a compromise solution based on the principle by providing an executive summary at the beginning to present the key findings.

See also Advance Organizer, Form Follows Function, Ockham’s Razor, Progressive Disclosure, and Serial Position Effects.

¹ The development of the inverted pyramid is attributed to Edwin Stanton, Abraham Lincoln’s Secretary of War (1865). See, for example, Just the Facts: How “Objectivity” Came to Define American Journalism by David T. Z. Mindich, New York University Press, 2000.
This evening at about 9:30 P.M., at Ford’s Theater, the President, while sitting in his private box with Mrs. Lincoln, Miss Harris, and Major Rathbone, was shot by an assassin who suddenly entered the box and approached the President. The assassin then leapt upon the stage, brandished a large dagger or knife, and made his escape in the rear of the theater. The pistol-ball entered the back of the President’s head and penetrated nearly through the head. The wound is mortal. The President has been insensible ever since it was inflicted and is now dying.

About the same hour an assassin, whether the same or not, entered Mr. Seward’s apartments, and under the pretense of having a prescription, was shown to the Secretary’s sick chamber. The assassin immediately rushed to the bed, and inflicted two or three stabs on the throat and two on the face. It is hoped the wounds may not be mortal. My apprehension is that they will prove fatal. The nurse alarmed Mr. Frederick Seward, who was in an adjoining room, and hastened to the door of his father’s room, when he met the assassin, who inflicted upon him one or more dangerous wounds. The recovery of Frederick Seward is doubtful.

It is not probable that the President will live throughout the night. General Grant and wife were advertised to be at the theater this evening, but he started for Burlington at six o’clock this evening. At a cabinet meeting at which General Grant was present, the subject of the state of the country, and the prospect of a speedy peace was discussed. The President was very cheerful and hopeful, and spoke very kindly of General Lee and others of the Confederacy, and of the establishment of government in Virginia. All the members of the cabinet, except Mr. Seward, are now in attendance upon the President.

I have seen Mr. Seward, but he and Frederick are both unconscious.

EDWIN M. STANTON,
Secretary of War. April 14, 1865.

This report of President Lincoln’s assassination established the inverted pyramid style of writing. Its economy of style, a stark contrast to the lavish prose of the day, was developed for efficient communication by telegraph.