

Structure

Having tested your thoughts and linked one thought to another, the most important aspect of writing a report is to now formalise your thoughts in a hierarchical and logical sequence. This means that your key thoughts should be followed by supporting but more detailed thoughts.

6.1 Hierarchy of thought

To start with, you need to summarise your objectives (or thoughts). This is scene setting and is an important part of effective report writing. Set the scene effectively at the beginning and it makes it easier for the reader to go on the journey (through your report) with you.

This hierarchical principle should be applied at all stages. Thoughts presented at a higher level should be a summary of the thoughts at a lower level. The grouping of thoughts must be of a similar type and logical.

For instance, Apples and Pears could be under a group heading of Fruit. Cars and Motorcycles might be under the group Motor Products. If you needed to put both groups together, because you wished to group them under “Inventory” say, then this should be done at a higher group level.

Logic and hierarchy is crucial for good report writing. What should be first should appear first, and what should be second, should appear second. So you need to take care that your logic is correct and tested.

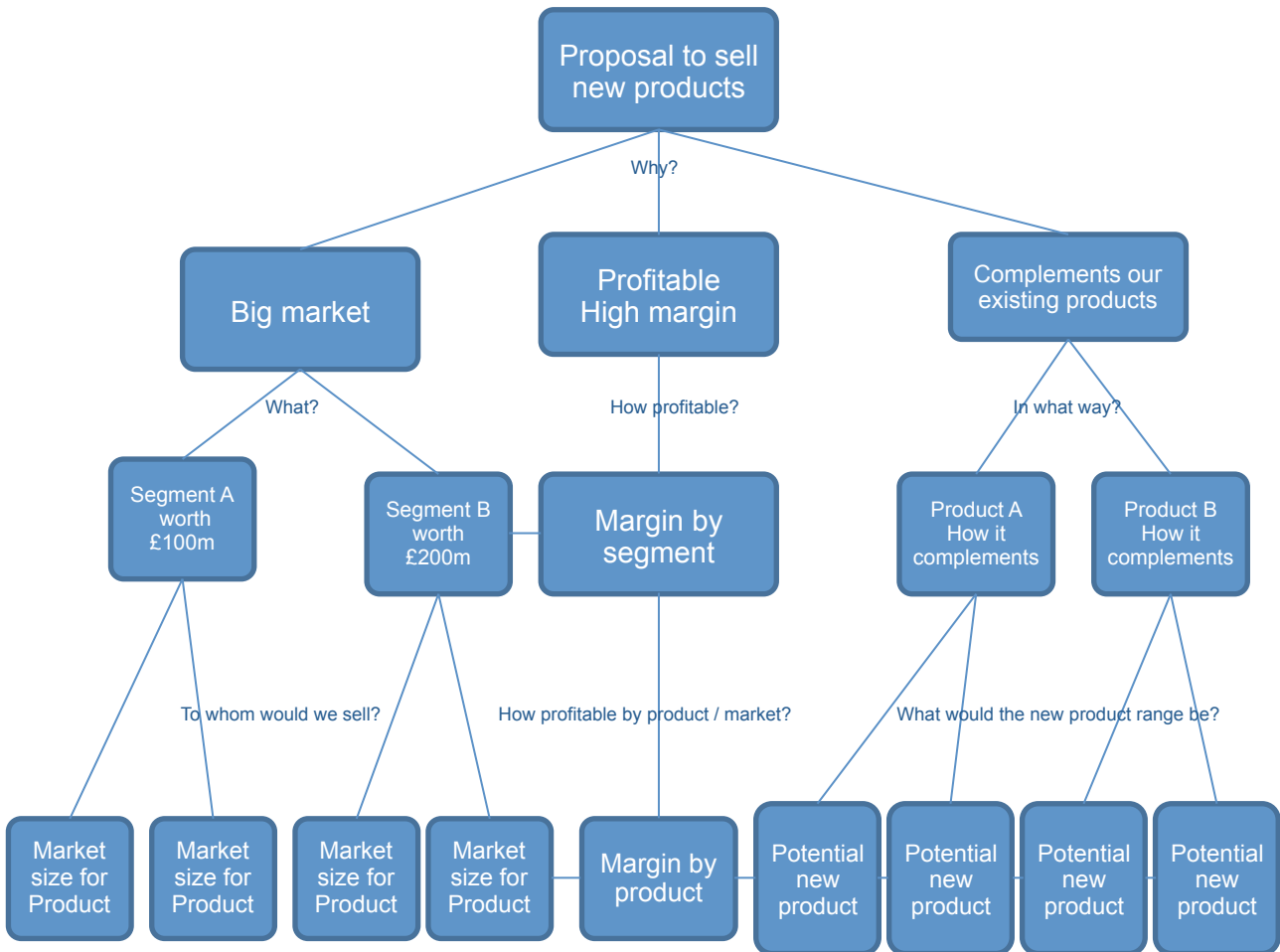
According to Barbara Minto in her book *The Pyramid Principle* the correct sequence of your thoughts depends on the analytical process that you consider appropriate. Minto says that there are four logical ways in which to order a set of ideas (or *thoughts* as we describe them here). These are:

- Deductively (major premise, minor premise, conclusion)
- Chronologically (first, second, third)
- Structurally (London, Paris, New York)
- Comparatively (first most important, second most important, etc.)

If deductive, your thoughts are reasoned in argument order. If chronological, you are working out the cause and effect of relationships in time order. If structurally, you are commenting on an existing structure and its implications. If comparatively, you are commenting on the order of importance.

6.2 Hierarchy and logic

Here is an example of the results of a logical sequence of thought. There is a vertical relationship between points and sub-points but there is also a relation within sets of sub-points. As you go down into sub-points, each sub-point begs questions which need to be answered by the subsequent layer and so on. Structuring your thoughts in this way enables you to think clearly.



If you were producing a real report along these lines, you might also include Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT).