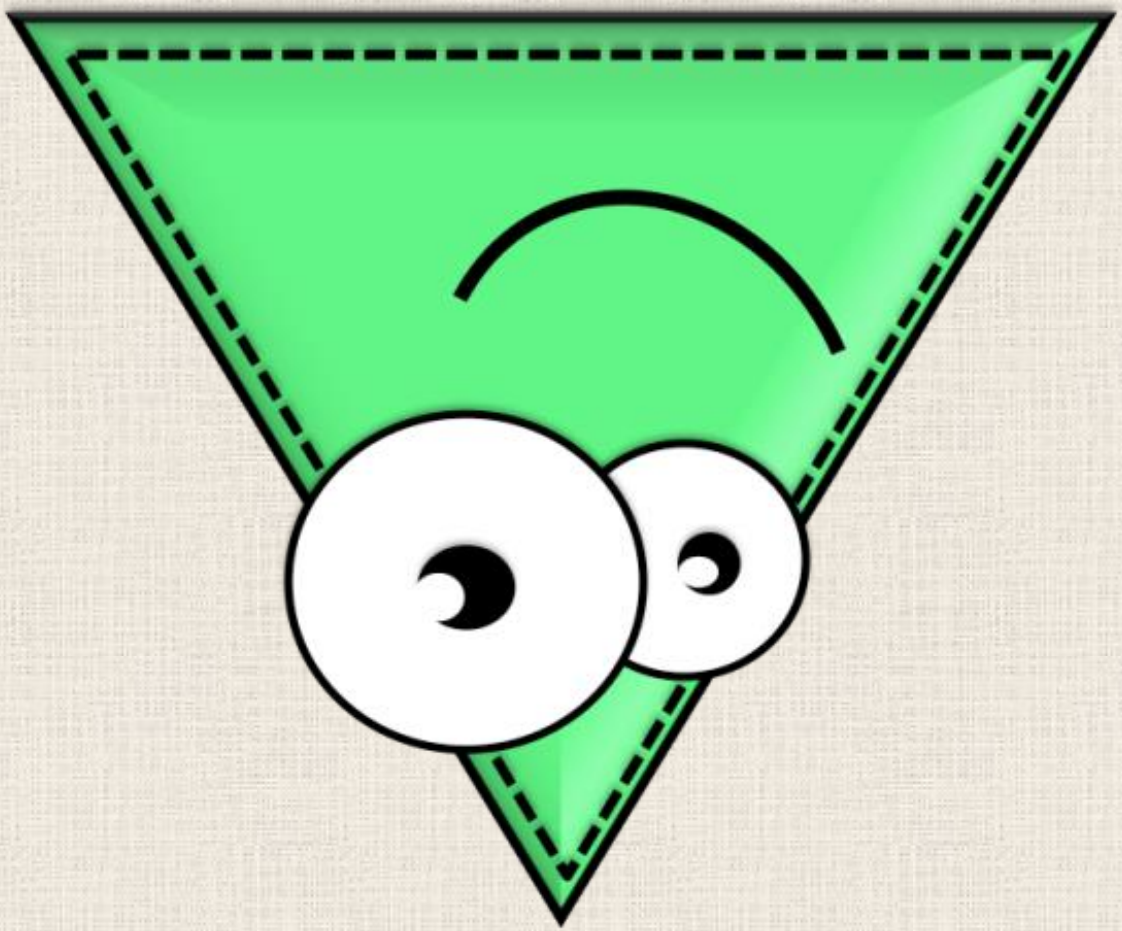
Inverted Pyramid Story



Inverted Pyramid Story

What Is an Inverted Pyramid Story?

News reporters often use a writing structure called the **Inverted Pyramid** to deliver information quickly and clearly. You'll see this format in newspapers, online articles, and breaking news stories. The most important facts come first, usually in the lead paragraph, followed by supporting details in order of decreasing importance. This structure helps readers get the main idea right away—even if they only read the first few lines.

Why Was It Invented?

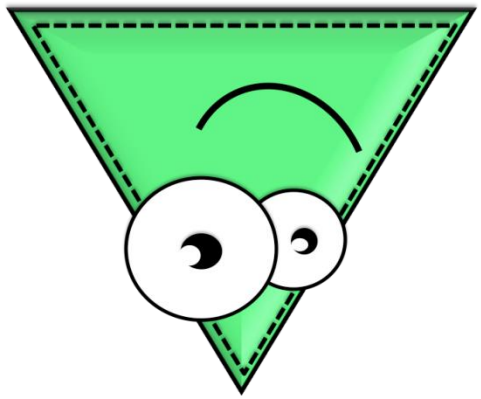
Many believe the Inverted Pyramid style was developed shortly after the invention of the telegraph. Back then, reporters had to send news stories over telegraph wires—one word at a time—and every word cost money. They needed to share the most essential information in as few words as possible. Plus, if the telegraph cut out mid-transmission, the key facts would still reach the newsroom.

Why It's Still Used Today

The Inverted Pyramid style remains popular because it's practical and efficient.

Some benefits include:

- **Readers can decide quickly** whether to keep reading or move on.
- **Editors can trim stories** from the bottom up without removing key facts.
- **Time-crunched readers get the main idea fast.**
- **Skimming becomes easier,** especially for online reading.



Inverted Pyramid Structure at a Glance

Lead Paragraph:

The "5 W's + H"
(Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?)

Supporting Details: Additional important facts.

Extras or Background: Lesser details that are nice to know but not essential.

Teacher Instructions: Inverted Pyramid News Activity

Objective:

This fun activity helps students discover how journalists write news stories using the inverted pyramid style! This means they place the most important information at the top and then include supporting details in order of importance. Students will practice identifying the 5 W's + H (Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How) in both real and rewritten historical news articles. They'll see how this structure makes it easy for readers to quickly grab the key facts. It's a great way to build their journalism skills while having some fun!

What's Included:

For each of the four articles in this project, you'll find **two versions**:

> **Original Version:** A historical newspaper article written in the style of the late 1800s or early 1900s. These are primary source texts that reflect how news was communicated at the time - often wordy, dramatic, or disorganized by modern standards.
>
> **Rewritten Version:** A student-friendly article rewritten to model the **inverted pyramid format**. These versions place the 5 W's + H in the opening paragraph and organize supporting details clearly and concisely.

Student Task

Students will:

- **Read the article** (you may assign one or all four, depending on time).
- **Determine whether each article follows the inverted pyramid structure.**
- **Highlight the 5 W's + H** using six different colors:
  - Create a key at the right side of the page assigning a color to each question (Who, What, When, Where, Why, How).
  - Highlight the **question words in the key** and then the **answers in the text** using matching colors.

Optional for More Advanced Students

Compare the original and rewritten versions to discuss how structure affects clarity, understanding, and readability.

Why Use Two Versions?

The **original articles** give students the opportunity to wrestle with more complex historical language and see how news writing has evolved. They also reinforce historical thinking skills by exposing students to authentic primary sources.

The **rewritten articles** offer a clear, modern example of the inverted pyramid structure. These can be used as models or supports, depending on your students' reading levels.

Option – Writing Inverted Paragraph Stories

Two printables are located at the end of this handout for students to use when writing inverted pyramid stories. The first is and outline for planning the story with the **5 W's + H** coming first, followed by sections for planning details and general information. Following the organizer, you will find a rubric for grading student stories.

President Lincoln Shot at Ford's Theatre

President Abraham Lincoln was shot at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., at around 9:30 p.m. on Friday night.

The president was sitting in a private box with his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, when a man entered from behind and shot him in the back of the head. The shooter then jumped onto the stage, waved a knife, and escaped through a back exit.

Doctors say Lincoln's injury is extremely serious. He has been unconscious since the attack and is not expected to survive the night.

Around the same time, another attack happened at Secretary of State William Seward's home. A man pretending to deliver medicine forced his way into the house and stabbed Mr. Seward several times while he was sick in bed. His son, Frederick Seward, was also badly hurt while trying to stop the attacker.

General Ulysses S. Grant was expected to be at the theater but did not attend.

Directions

This is a modern version of a real newspaper article originally published on April 15, 1865, about President Lincoln's assassination. Your job is to decide if this follows the *inverted pyramid* structure - where the most important information comes first, followed by supporting details.

Highlight each part of the article that answers the "5 W's + H" using six different colors.

Create a key here. Select a color for both the question and the answer and highlight the key below and the article using your key.

Who?

What?

When?

Where?

Why?

How?

Answer Key

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Who?

What?

When?

Where?

Why?

How?

The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

This evening at about 9:30 p.m. at Ford's Theatre, the President, while sitting in his private box with Mrs. Lincoln, Mrs. Harris and Major Rathburn, was shot by an assassin, who suddenly entered the box and approached behind the President.

The assassin then leaped upon the stage, brandishing a large dagger or knife, and made his escape in the rear of the theatre.

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 apartment and under 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 chest 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 rented room, and he 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 through the night.

General Grant and his wife were advertised to be at the theatre...

Read the entire article at On This Day.

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Why?

How?

Custer and His Men Killed in Battle Against Native American Forces

On June 25, 1876, General George Custer and his soldiers were killed during a surprise attack on a large Native American camp near the Little Bighorn River.

Custer's group was part of a larger military expedition led by General Alfred Terry. Custer split from the main group and attacked a village believed to be led by Sitting Bull. His forces charged the center of the camp with five companies. Meanwhile, Major Reno led seven other companies from another direction.

The soldiers were overwhelmed and forced to retreat. Custer, his brother, his nephew, and his brother-in-law all died in the fighting, along with every soldier in his group—over 200 in total. Major Reno's group was surrounded by Native American warriors and trapped in the hills for an entire day. They were rescued when General Gibbon's troops arrived and the Native Americans left.

In total, about 300 U.S. soldiers were killed or injured. Seventeen were officers. Army leaders in other cities later said that Custer's decision to attack such a large force—reportedly 4,000 Native American warriors—was risky and unwise.

Some generals believe the story may have been exaggerated, but people across the country are anxiously waiting for more information.

Directions

This is a modern version of a real newspaper article originally published in *The New York Times* on 6/25/1876. Determine if it is an inverted pyramid story by highlighting 'The 5 W's + H' using six different colors.

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The Little Horn Massacre

The dispatches giving an account of the slaughter of Gen. Custer's command, published by The Times of yesterday, are confirmed and supplemented by official reports from Gen. A.H. Terry, commanding the expedition. On June 25 Gen. Custer's command came upon the main camp of Sitting Bull, and at once attacked it, charging the thickest part of it with five companies, Major Reno, with seven companies attacking on the other side. The soldiers were repulsed and a wholesale slaughter ensued. Gen. Custer, his brother, his nephew, and his brother-in-law were killed, and not one of his detachment escaped. The Indians surrounded Major Reno's command and held them in the hills during a whole day, but Gibbon's command came up and the Indians left. The number of killed is stated at 300 and the wounded at 31. Two hundred and seven men are said to have been buried in one place. The list of killed includes seventeen commissioned officers.

It is the opinion of Army officers in Chicago, Washington, and Philadelphia, including Gens. Sherman and Sheridan, that Gen. Custer was rashly imprudent to attack such a large number of Indians, Sitting Bull's force being 4,000 strong. Gen. Sherman thinks that the accounts of the disaster are exaggerated. The wounded soldiers are being conveyed to Fort Lincoln. Additional details are anxiously awaited throughout the country….

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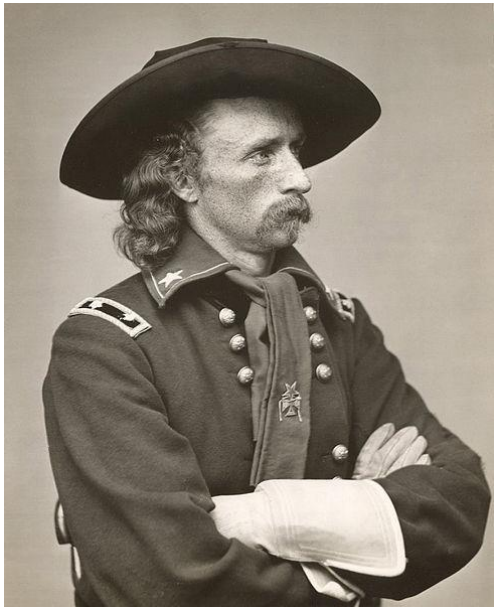

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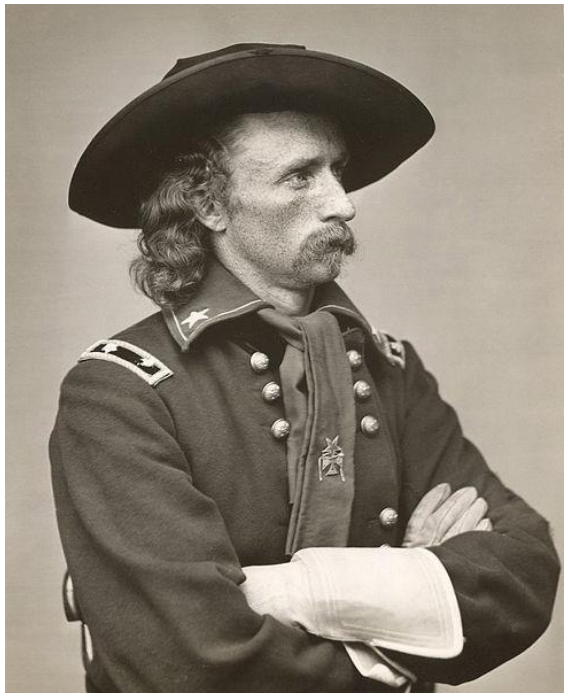

Thomas Edison Creates a New Electric Light That May Change the World

Inventor Thomas Edison has developed a new electric light that may one day replace gas lamps in homes and businesses.

The Times visited Edison's lab in Menlo Park, New Jersey, to see the invention firsthand. Edison, who was busy at work and had hands covered in soot, proudly demonstrated his electric lamp to reporters.

The lamp gives off light using a tiny horseshoe-shaped strip of carbonized paper, about as thin as a thread. This strip is sealed inside a glass bulb, which has had almost all the air removed. The vacuum inside the bulb helps the paper glow brightly without burning up.

Electricity flows through two platinum wires attached to the ends of the carbon strip. These wires connect to copper wires through a special glass tube. The copper carries the electric current but is kept away from the vacuum so it doesn't melt.

The glowing carbon gives off a steady, bright light. The design is simple, efficient, and—Edison believes—affordable enough to be used everywhere.

In his workshop, Edison showed how the carbon strips are made. First, thin bristol board is shaped into a horseshoe and placed into a furnace to be carbonized. After being heated and cleaned, the fragile black filaments are placed into the glass lamp.

Edison and his team believe this invention will soon make gas lighting a thing of the past.

Directions

Read the article below about Thomas Edison's electric light. This version has been rewritten from an original New York Times article published in 1880.

Your task is to determine if this article follows the *inverted pyramid structure*—where the most important information comes first, followed by supporting facts and background details.

Highlight each part of the article that answers the "5 W's + H" using six different colors.

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The first place visited was the room in which the furnace for carbonizing the paper is situated. The furnace is of the ordinary pattern, and on the coals rested a horseshoe mold, in which the bristol board to be charred was placed. Over each horseshoe a piece of tissue paper was placed and the whole was washed until all the material of the card-board, except the carbon, was taken away. When the filaments were taken from the mold they resembled pieces of black thread. The particles hung tenaciously together, however, and the black horse-shoe was easily placed in the platinum clamps of the globe of the lamp….

Read the entire article at On This Day.

Instructions:

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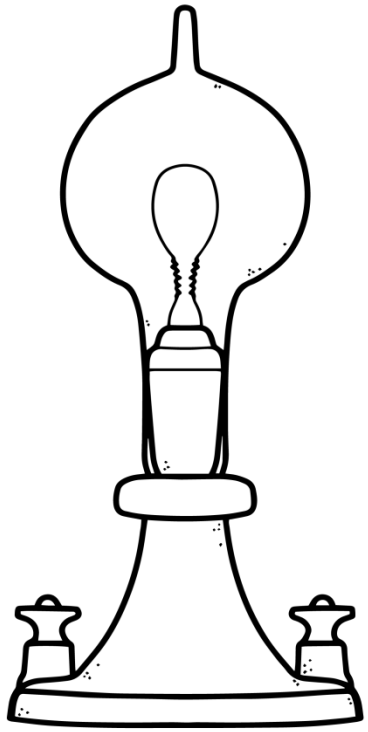

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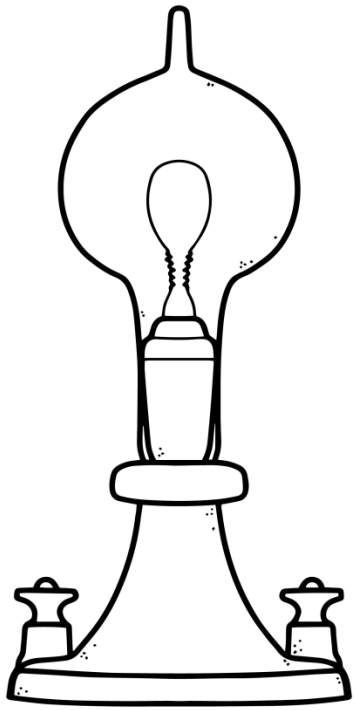

Johnstown Flood Kills Hundreds as Dam Breaks

Pittsburg, May 31 — A tragic disaster struck the city of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, late this afternoon when a massive dam burst, sending a wall of water crashing through the valley and destroying everything in its path. Early reports estimate that hundreds, possibly thousands, of people have lost their lives.

The dam, located at the base of a mountain lake approximately nine miles from Johnstown, gave way around 4:00 p.m. after being hit by a powerful waterspout. The lake stretched eight miles long and three miles wide. When the dam collapsed, an avalanche of water surged down the mountain, joining the South Fork of the Conemaugh River and turning it into a deadly flood more than 20 feet high.

As the flood raced toward Johnstown—home to nearly 25,000 people—it destroyed homes, factories, and bridges in seconds. Entire buildings were swept away with people still inside. Eyewitnesses reported seeing wreckage and bodies floating down the river in the aftermath.

Warnings had been issued earlier in the day, around 1:00 p.m., when water was first seen flowing over the weakest part of the dam. Despite the alerts, three hours later the dam failed completely, taking out railroads, bridges, and telegraph lines, and cutting off all communication with the city.

Superintendent Robert Pitcairn of the Pennsylvania Railroad reported seeing over 200 people stranded on floating debris, including gondola cars and shanties. A telegraph operator said he counted 63 bodies pass by his office in just 20 minutes.

Rescue efforts are underway, but communication with Johnstown has been lost since 6:00 p.m. The full extent of the damage and loss of life remains unknown.

Directions

This is a modern version of a real newspaper article originally published in *The New York Times* on 5/31/1889. Determine if it is an inverted pyramid story by highlighting 'The 5 W's + H' using six different colors.

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Hundreds of Lives Lost

Pittsburg, May 31 -- An appalling catastrophe is reported from Johnstown, Cambria County, the meagre details of which indicate that the city of 25,000 inhabitants has been practically wiped out of existence and that hundreds if not thousands of lives have been lost.

A dam at the foot of a mountain lake eight miles long and three miles wide, about nine miles up the valley of the South Fork of the Conemaugh River, broke at 4 o'clock this afternoon, just as it was struck by a waterspout, and the whole tremendous volume of water swept in a resistless avalanche down the mountain side, making its own channel until it reached the South Fork of the Conemaugh, swelling it to the proportions of Niagara's rapids.

The flood swept onward to the Conemaugh like a tidal wave, over twenty feet in height, to Johnstown, six or eight miles below, gathering force as it tore along through the wider channel, and quickly swept everything before it. Houses, factories, and bridges were overwhelmed in the twinkling of an eye and with their human occupants were carried in a vast chaos down the raging torrent.

The water began flowing over the dam or abutment at the weakest part of the mountain lake at about 1 o'clock, when Johnstown and people down the valley were warned by messengers to to look out for a flood as the result of a waterspout. Three hours later the whole end of the lake gave way, sweeping everything before it, railroads, bridges and telegraph lines included.

The scene of the disaster is cut off entirely from all manner of communication and has been since 6 o'clock this evening, and fragmentary details of the character and extent of the calamity only have come to hand from various places in the valley.

About 6 o'clock Superintendent Robert Pitcairn of the Pennsylvania Railroad telegraphed from [text unreadable] Hollow, at the gap in the Laurel Ridge Mountains west of Johnstown, that he had seen about two hundred persons afloat on gondola cars, shanties, & amp;c., and that the disaster was appalling.

One telegraph operator says he counted sixty-three bodies in twenty minutes floating past his office….

Read the entire article at On This Day.

Instructions:

This is the actual newspaper article that appeared in *The New York Times* on 5/31/1889. Determine if it is an inverted pyramid story by highlighting 'The 5 W's + H' using six different colors.

Make a key by highlighting the question word in a specific color. Then highlight the answer in the article using the same color.

Who?

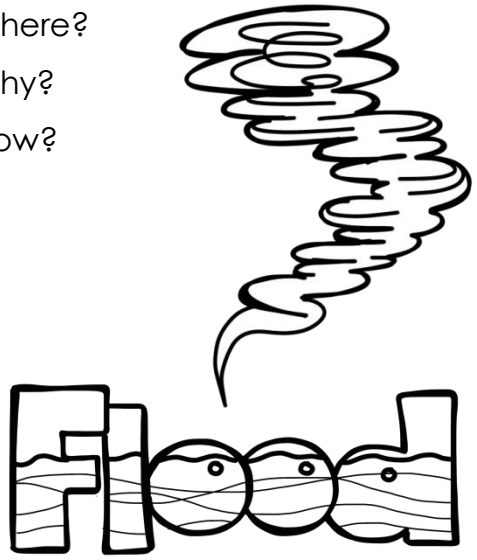
What?

When?

Where?

Why?

How?



Hundreds of Lives Lost – Answer Key

Pittsburg, May 31 -- An appalling catastrophe is reported from Johnstown, Cambria County, the meagre details of which indicate that the city of 25,000 inhabitants has been practically wiped out of existence and that hundreds if not thousands of lives have been lost.

A dam at the foot of a mountain lake eight miles long and three miles wide, about nine miles up the valley of the South Fork of the Conemaugh River, broke at 4 o'clock this afternoon, just as it was struck by a waterspout, and the whole tremendous volume of water swept in a resistless avalanche down the mountain side, making its own channel until it reached the South Fork of the Conemaugh, swelling it to the proportions of Niagara's rapids.

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Who?

What?

When?

Where?

Why?

How?

Activity 1 - Inverted Pyramid Writing Practice

Prompt: Write your own inverted pyramid article based on one of the following headlines or create your own.

Headline Ideas:

"School Cafeteria Declares Tater Tot Shortage!"

"Mysterious Loud Boom Wakes Up Entire Town"

"Fifth Grade Class Discovers Ancient Artifact on Playground"

Instructions:

Start with the most important information first: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Then add supporting details in order of importance.

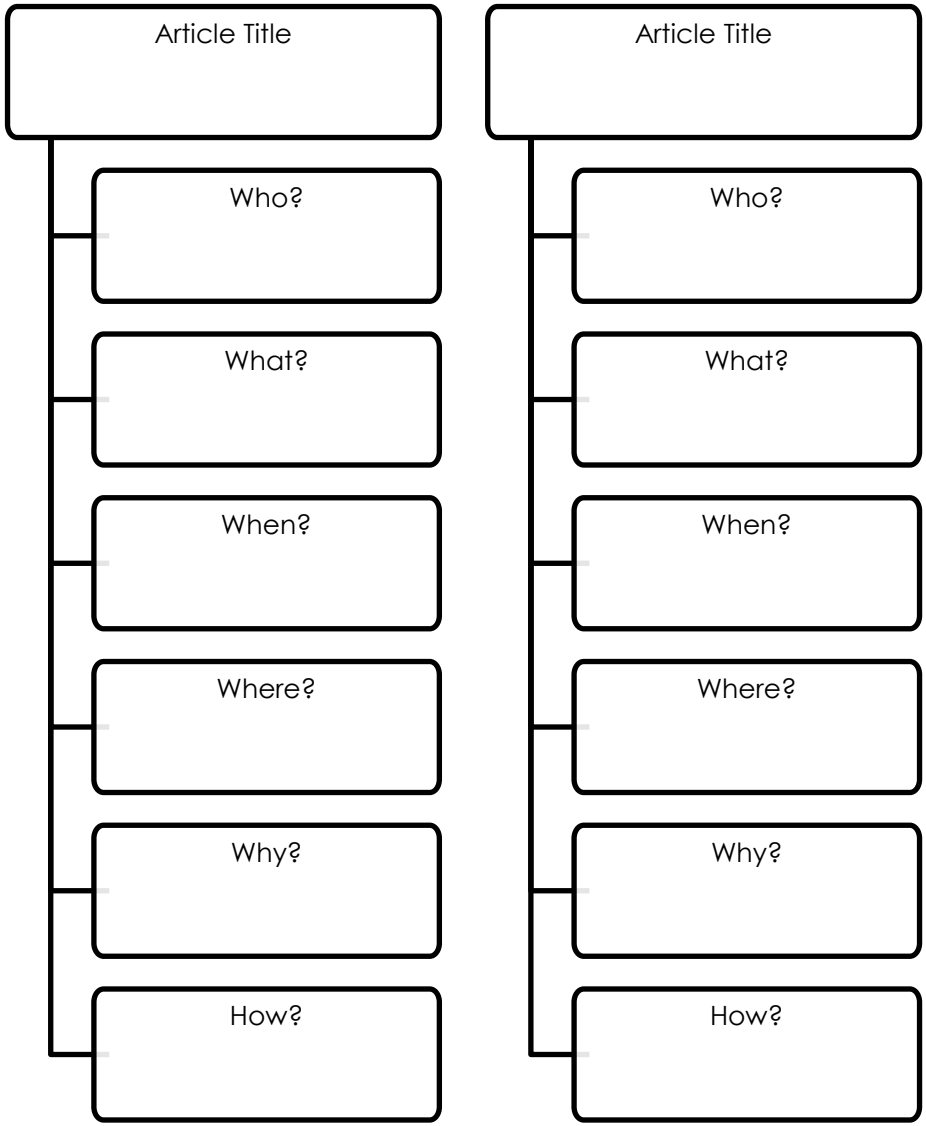
End with background or less essential information.

Activity 2 - Compare Historical and Modern Articles

Activity: Compare one of the historical articles from the lesson with a modern news article (you may print one from a trusted source).

Instructions:

Use the graphic organizer for both articles. Then answer the questions.



Compare & Contrast Questions

How are the article structures similar or different?

Which article had more background details? Which one was more direct?

Which writing style do you prefer and why?

Activity 3 - What Makes It Inverted? (Assessment Activity)

Instructions: Read the article excerpt below and answer the questions.

Article Excerpt:

A new after-school robotics program began this Monday at Washington Middle School, with more than 40 students participating in the first session. The program, funded by a local tech grant, aims to promote STEM education by teaching students coding and robotics design. Sessions will be held twice a week.

Questions:

Who? _____

What? _____

When? _____

Where? _____

Why? _____

How? _____

Challenge Question: What sentence gives the most important information?

_____

_____

_____

Activity 4 – What am I?

Activity: Read the following paragraph. Is it written using the inverted pyramid structure? Why or why not?

Excerpt:

t was a quiet Monday afternoon when the school hallways buzzed with excitement. Samantha, a fifth grader, clutched a dusty object she had unearthed from beneath the swings. At first, she thought it was just a rock, but teachers quickly realized it might be an artifact from early settlers.

Discussion Questions:

What is the structure of this article?

Where does the most important information appear?

How does the tone or style differ from the inverted pyramid articles?

Why might a writer choose this format instead?

Activity 4 - What am I? Sample Answers

Activity: Read the following paragraph. Is it written using the inverted pyramid structure? Why or why not?

Excerpt:

It was a quiet Monday afternoon when the school hallways buzzed with excitement. Samantha, a fifth grader, clutched a dusty object she had unearthed from beneath the swings. At first, she thought it was just a rock, but teachers quickly realized it might be an artifact from early settlers.

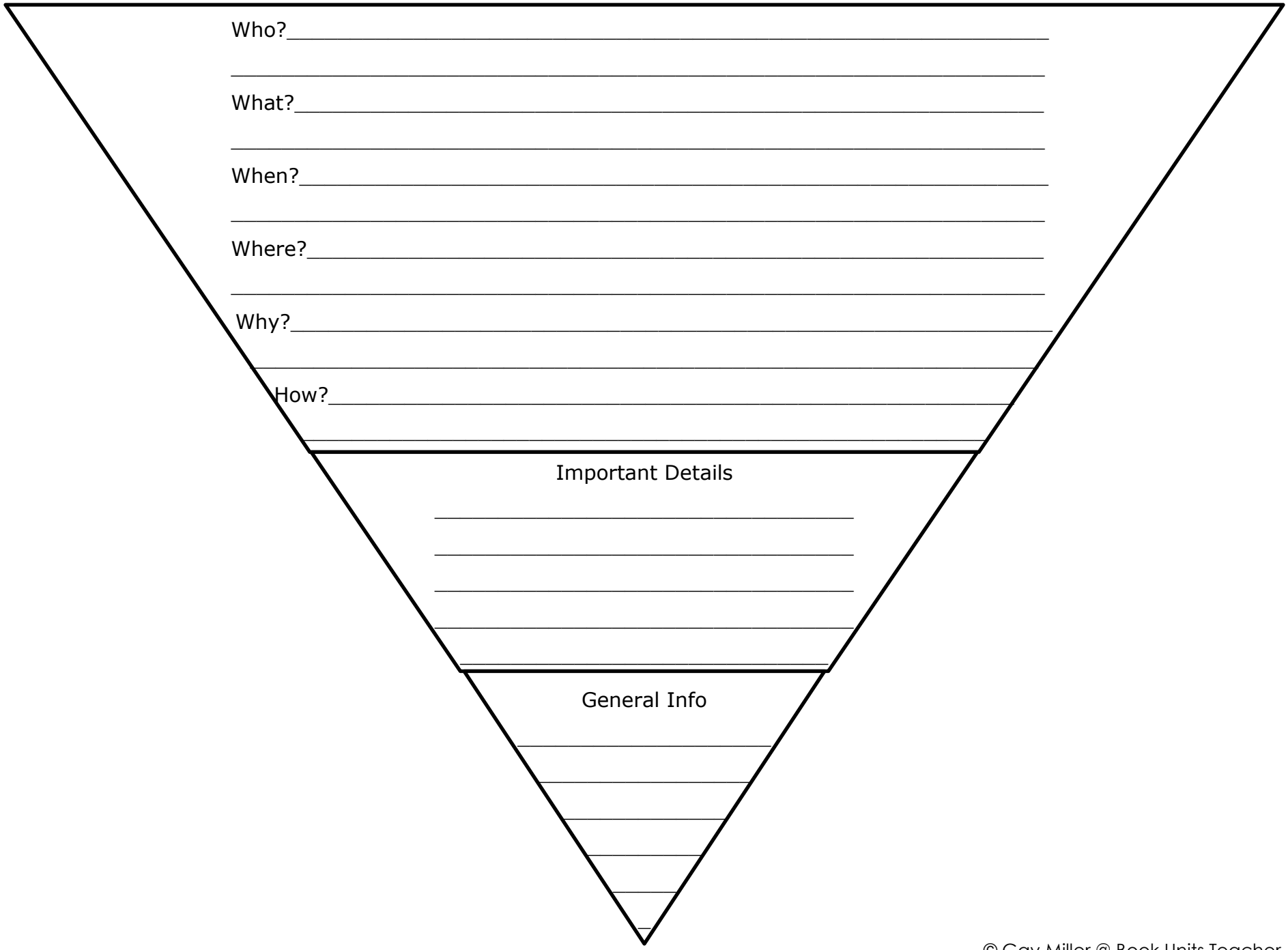
Discussion Questions:

What is the structure of this article?
This article is written like a story. It tells what happened in the order it happened instead of starting with the most important part.

Where does the most important information appear?
The most important part—that the object might be an artifact—comes at the end, not the beginning.

How does the tone or style differ from the inverted pyramid articles?
It sounds more like a story and less like a news report. It includes feelings and builds excitement, instead of just giving facts right away.

Why might a writer choose this format instead?
Writers might use this type of writing to make the reader curious, to entertain, or to tell a fun or interesting story. It helps the reader feel more connected to what's happening.



Inverted Pyramid Story Rubric

Category	4 – Excellent	3 – Good	2 – Needs Work	1 – Try Again
Lead Paragraph	Includes all 5 W's + H clearly and in order of importance	Includes most of the 5 W's + H with minor omissions	Missing several W's or H; some details are unclear	Missing key information; hard to follow
Supporting Details	Adds helpful, accurate details that explain the story	Adds some relevant details; mostly accurate	Includes few or vague details	Lacks supporting details or is off-topic
Organization	Clear inverted pyramid structure; info flows logically	Mostly follows pyramid format with few missteps	Structure is confusing; order of ideas is off	Little or no structure; difficult to understand
Highlighting (Color Key)	All W's + H are color-coded and correctly matched to the article	Most are correct; one or two mismatches	Some colors missing or incorrectly used	No highlighting or incorrect/missing key
Conventions (Grammar & Spelling)	Free of errors; easy to read	Few minor errors; meaning is clear	Several errors that interfere with meaning	Frequent errors make it difficult to read
Effort & Neatness	Completed with care and attention to detail	Complete; shows effort	Some effort but rushed or sloppy in parts	Rushed, incomplete, or hard to read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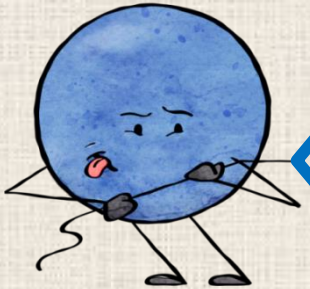

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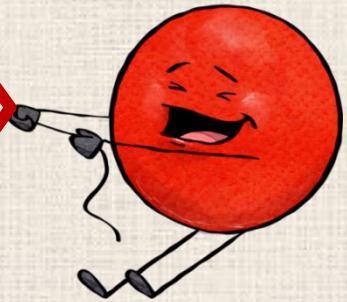

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