Stating the Obvious: The Three Keys to Better Intelligence Assessments

by
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Introduction

There is no shortage of stories, books, or articles on military intelligence failures. In recent history, the two most famous examples are the September 11 terrorist attacks and the inability of the United States to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, even though intelligence assessments indicated the likely existence of those weapons and provided justification for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.[1] Even more recently, the media was abuzz (some would argue unfairly) with the "intelligence failure" in Afghanistan after the Taliban's swift takeover in August 2021.[2] I recall my own failed assessment during a rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center as a lighthearted example. I confidently announced to the brigade commander, while an observer coach/trainer's video camera rolled (*ouch*), that the enemy's main attack was along the northern avenue of approach, just shortly before the bulk of their forces came crashing through our southern positions.

Assessments are essential to successful outcomes. Based on my observations and the experience I gained from assessing assessments while assigned to a Department of Defense agency, I now understand the *greatest secret* to a well-developed assessment—one most likely to support a *winning decision* because of its discussion-generating potential.[3] According to decision-making process experts J. Edward Russo and Paul J. H. Schoemaker, a winning decision is about "getting it right the first time."[4] While I will not argue for or against the effectiveness of United States intelligence in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the Joint Readiness Training Center for that matter, I believe that analyzing an assessment's building blocks will lead to more useful outcomes. Specifically, I believe that the best assessments—

✦ Make an argument.

✦ Make a prediction.

✦ Use estimative language.

Yes, it is that simple. My definition might seem trite; it might seem obvious. Yet, in my experience, too few intelligence assessments contain these three basic keys. While quality intelligence is the result of many factors, if your assessment fails to make a clear argument, make a prediction, or use estimative language to express the likelihood of an event or the level of confidence attributed to a judgment, your organization is bound to run into difficulties.[5] Intelligence professionals make assessments all the time. We assess the impacts of the weather, craft threat courses of action (COAs), and take

a stance on what a strategic competitor may or may not do in an area of interest. Intelligence assessments are our products, what we go to work to do.

This article will discuss each of the three keys in detail and your part in assessment development. I will start by revisiting the definitions of terms according to doctrine and professional literature. Then I will demonstrate how the three keys are grounded in those ideas. It is my hope you will agree with all-American athlete and professional coach Dan John, who says, "the greatest secret…in every field of life is always something obvious" and recommends that we master the obvious first before addressing the smaller details.[6]

The Intelligence Assessment in Doctrine and Professional Literature

Doctrine defines *intelligence estimate* as "the appraisal…of available intelligence relating to a specific situation or condition with a view of determining the courses of action open to the enemy or adversary and the order of probability of their adoption."[7] Simple enough. Doctrine and common usage use the word *assessment* interchangeably with *estimate* and *appraisal*.[8] For this article, I will do the same.

In professional literature, I will use Sherman Kent, a towering figure in the history of the Central Intelligence Agency, as my expert. Sherman Kent wrote, "estimating is what you do when you do not know" in his essay on estimative intelligence, first published in 1968.[9] He imagined the perfect estimate as a complete pyramid (Figure 1, on the next page).[10] Near-certain facts relevant to the examined situation represent solid blocks of stonework that form the pyramid's base.[11] The ideal apex of the pyramid is the precise answer we are looking for—"that if we know this with certainty we will have what we are after."[12]

Working from the base, the analyst builds the pyramid's foundation by stacking new material through the art and science of analysis.[13] The analyst constructs the pyramid's actual peak for a real-world estimate when the analyst can no longer support new, genuine deductions—"we reason our way up the pyramid toward the top."[14] Sherman Kent calls this peak a "*useful approximation*"—"a mix of fact and judgment," which he says is the "next best thing to 'knowing' " (Figure 2, on the next page).[15]

Sherman Kent's pyramid analogy also incorporates confidence levels. The facts stack vertically to create the general slope of the pyramid. The shape of the peak represents the
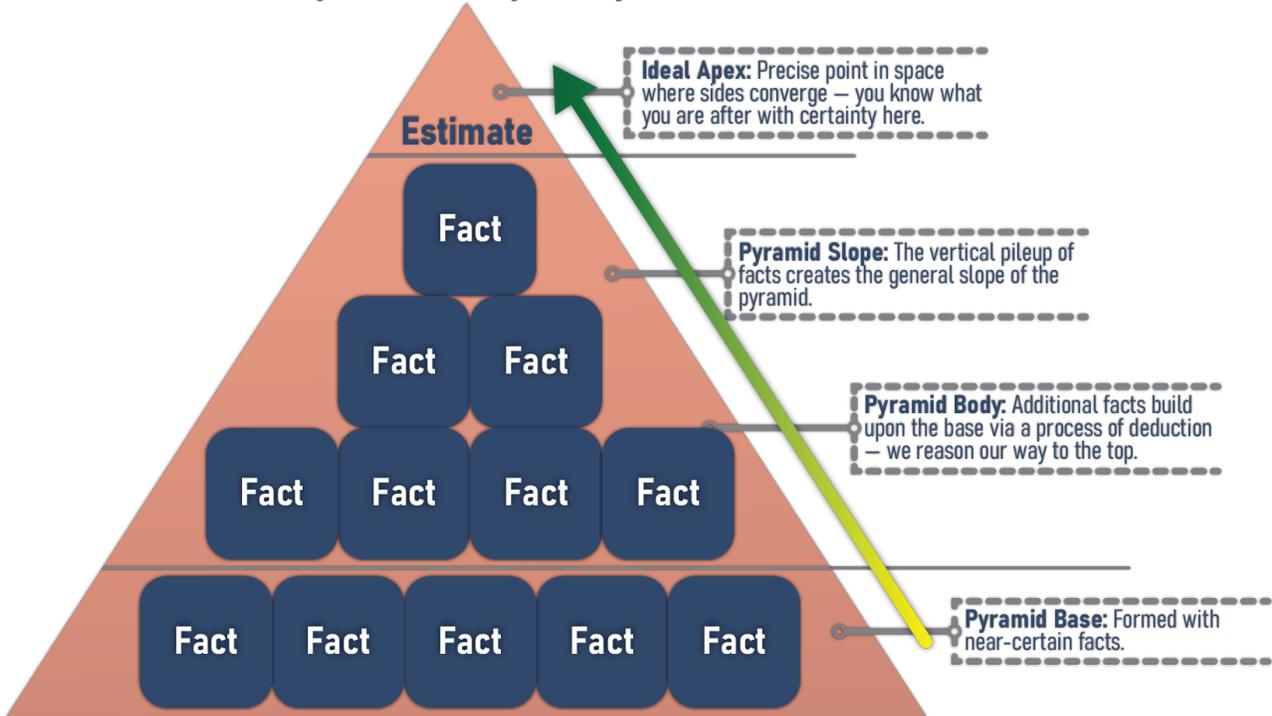
Ideal Apex of a Complete Pyramid

Ideal Apex: Precise point in space where sides converge — you know what you are after with certainty here.

Estimate

Fact

Pyramid Slope: The vertical pileup of facts creates the general slope of the pyramid.

Fact Fact

Pyramid Body: Additional facts build upon the base via a process of deduction — we reason our way to the top.

Fact Fact Fact Fact

Fact Fact Fact Fact Fact

Pyramid Base: Formed with near-certain facts.

Figure 1. Sherman Kent's Pyramid of a Perfect Estimate[16]

Ideal Apex of a Complete Pyramid

Apex: A useful approximation of what you wanted to know with complete certainty (ideal apex).

Apex

Estimate

Fact

Pyramid Body: New material is a mix of fact and judgment — remove the impossible.

Mix of Fact & Judgment

Fact Fact Fact

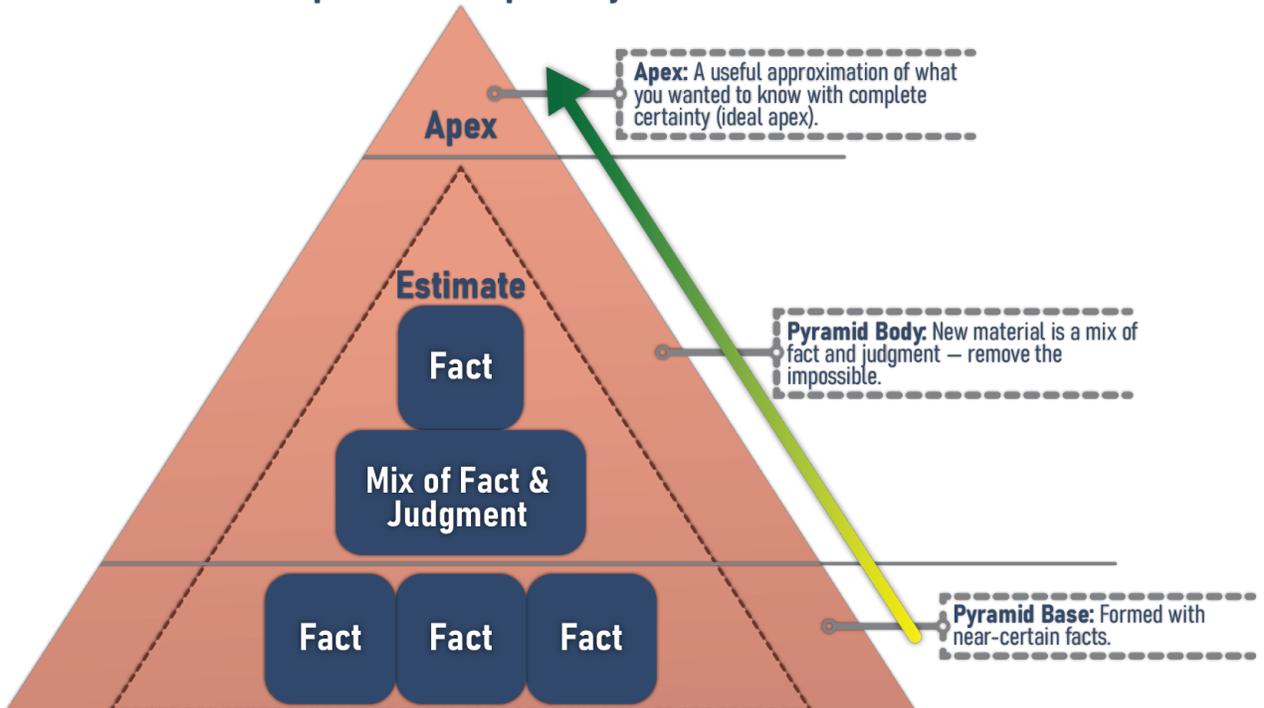**Pyramid Base:** Formed with near-certain facts.

Figure 2. Sherman Kent's Pyramid of a Real-World Estimate[17]

analyst's degree of certainty to be conveyed to their audience in the finished product. A sharp rise demonstrates high confidence in an individual assessment, while increasing truncation of the pyramid (bluntness) corresponds to a lower confidence level and, therefore, a wider range of possibilities (Figure 3). The least useful assessments do not move beyond the base's facts and can hardly even be considered intelligence.[18]

As you can see, the three keys are in both doctrine and professional literature. When we make an argument and a prediction, doctrine asks us to predict a future adversary's COA based on the current situation. Similarly, Sherman Kent urges us to deduce a useful approximation of what we wish to know—one block (fact, judgment, or assumption) at a time. The judgment expressed in our COAs and useful approximations serves as our main analytic arguments. For estimative language, doctrine asks us to express future adversary actions in order of likeliness (probability). In comparison, Sherman Kent speaks of incorporating degrees of confidence in our estimates. Now that I have established their links to doctrine and professional knowledge, I will elaborate on each of the three keys and the danger of omitting them from our assessments.

The Three Keys and Their Associated Assessment Outcomes If Omitted

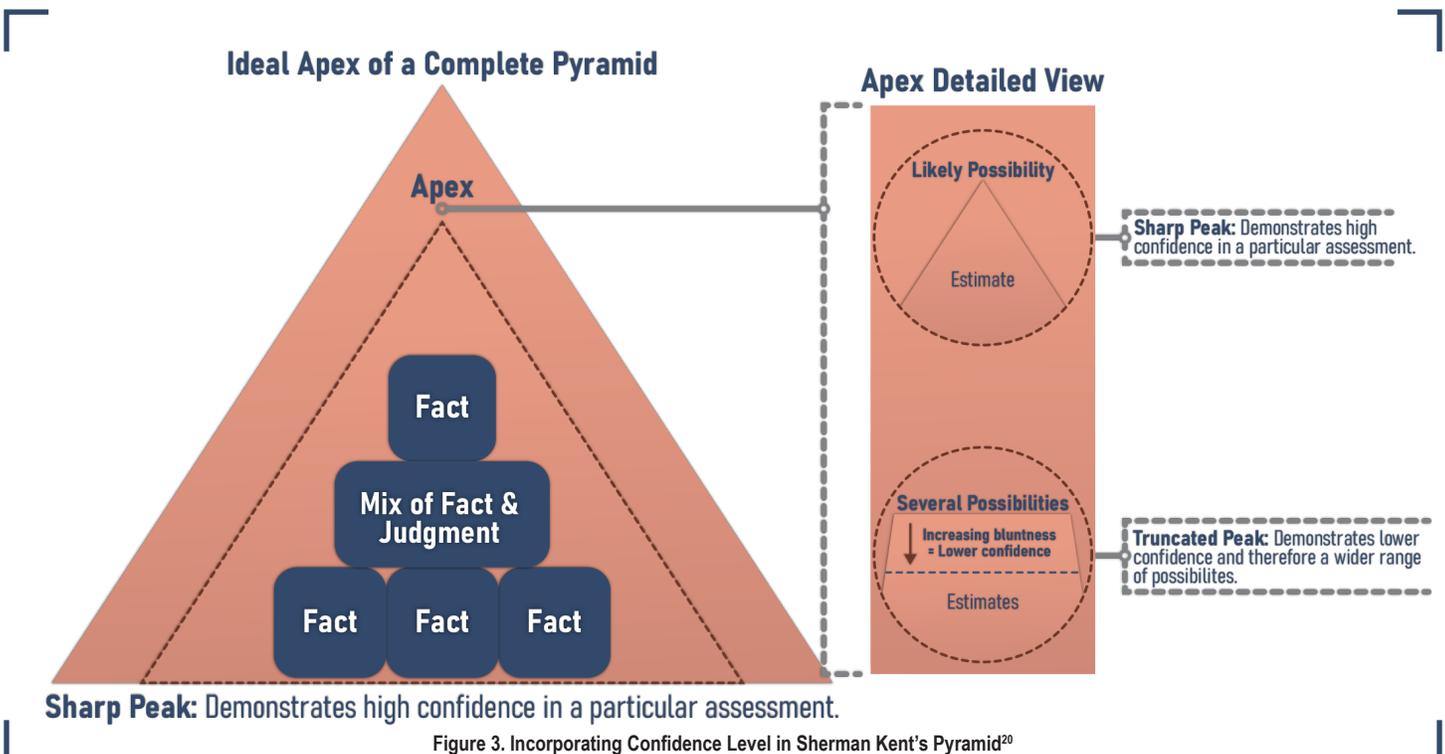The best assessments contain clear arguments. A clear argument follows the basic paragraph structure:
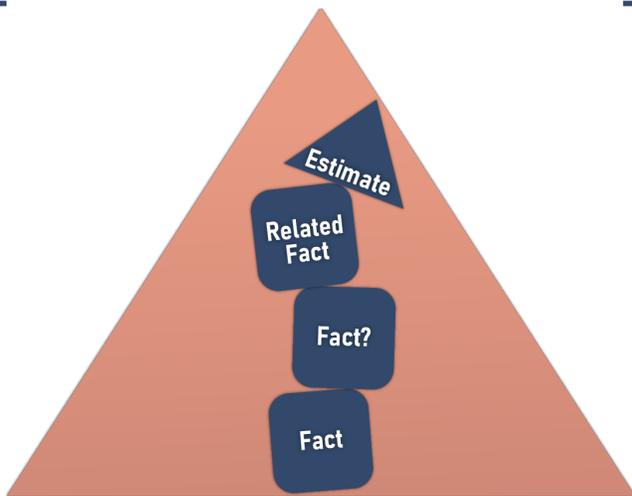
✦ It opens with a central idea that takes a specific position.

✦ It supports the central idea in the ensuing body of the paragraph with several points.

✦ It ends with a conclusion while recapping the central idea.[19]

Obvious, yes, but too often, many assessments either fail to support a central idea with its pertinent facts and key assumptions or, worse, have no main idea at all. When this occurs, the principal is presented with raw data bereft of connections.[21] Using the pyramid analogy, we present a teetering obelisk (an unsupported central idea) (Figure 4, on the next page) or a shallow foundation (information only) (Figure 5, on the next page). In contrast, the best assessments—like the best arguments—leave no uncertainty regarding your primary contention and its supporting rationale.[22]

The most useful assessments also make predictions. The utility of intelligence is it anticipates future occurrences and informs the decision maker by revealing the variances in possible COAs.[23] Using Sherman Kent's analogy once more, we imagine a nonpredictive assessment as a pyramid with a severely truncated top (many COAs), so broad and featureless that the audience cannot discern anything that would indicate the occurrence of one possibility over the other. In this instance, the analyst fails to move beyond the basic facts and produces an assessment more akin to "news" as opposed to intelligence.[24] The analyst becomes a broadcaster.

Finally, analysts must use estimative language to convey confidence levels, expressions of likelihood, and ranges in their key analytic judgments.[25] Using the terms *low*, *moderate*, and *high* is a simple way to express a confidence level in a judgment.[26] The analyst's confidence level rests on the number of key assumptions, source credibility and diversity, and strength of argumentation.[27] As with an argumentative paragraph, an analyst must be able to justify their confidence level in a judgment using these three factors. Expressions of likelihood refer to the probability of a situation occurring


Ideal Apex of a Complete Pyramid

Apex

Fact

Mix of Fact & Judgment

Fact   Fact   Fact

Sharp Peak: Demonstrates high confidence in a particular assessment.

Apex Detailed View

Likely Possibility

Estimate

Sharp Peak: Demonstrates high confidence in a particular assessment.

Several Possibilities

↓ Increasing bluntness = Lower confidence

Estimates

Truncated Peak: Demonstrates lower confidence and therefore a wider range of possibilites.

Figure 3. Incorporating Confidence Level in Sherman Kent's Pyramid[20]

Unsupported Argument: Main idea presented with raw data bereft of connections.

Figure 4. Pyramid Missing the Three Keys to Better Assessments-The Teetering Obelisk[28]
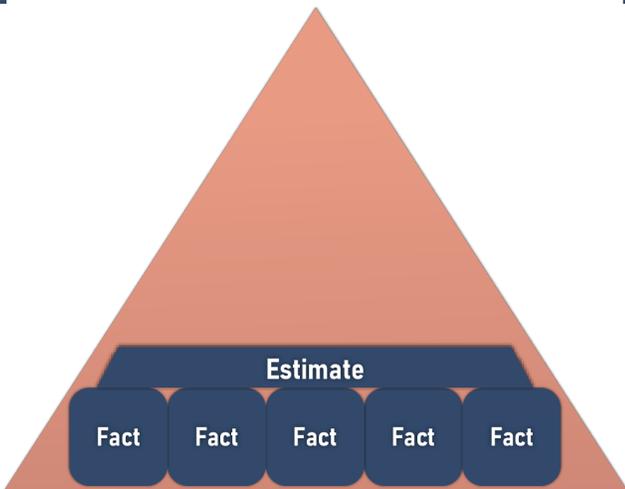
No Argument or Prediction: No argument or prediction presented, just the facts — akin to reporting the news.

Figure 5. Pyramid Missing the Three Keys to Better Assessments-The Broadcaster[29]
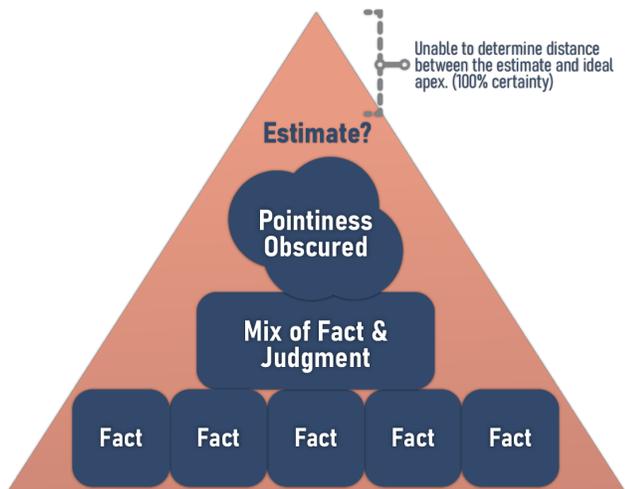
No Estimative Language: No certainty or confidence expressed in the judgment — audience left to determine validity.

Figure 6. Pyramid Missing the Three Keys to Better Assessments-Your Guess is as Good as Mine[30]

and include terms such as *almost no chance*, *roughly even chance*, or *almost certain*.[31] Additionally, an analyst's estimative language should incorporate ranges to provide a more accurate sense of uncertainty in assessment.[32] A range is the area between a specific judgment's upper and lower limits at a particular confidence level or expression of likelihood.[33]

Confidence levels, expressions of likelihood, and range estimates work together to complete a quality assessment. Please make use of them! However, analysts must be careful not to mix confidence and likelihood terms in the same sentence. Statements such as "we assess with low confidence (confidence term) that country Y will likely (likelihood term)…" can create confusion for your audience.[34] Instead, use the full suite of estimative language throughout your assessment. For example, "we assess with high confidence (confidence level) the main enemy attack will comprise 1 to 4 (range) tank companies and low confidence the main enemy attack will comprise 3 to 4 (range) tank companies. The enemy attack will almost certainly (likelihood) commence in the next 24 to 48 (range) hours due to…."

Unfortunately, even these simple estimative language terms or ranges are often missing in our assessments or are not always presented in the same way if included. According to doctrine, it is the very "estimative nature of intelligence [that] distinguishes it from the mass of other information available to the commander."[35] If that is true, much analytic output is not intelligence at all.

If we use the pyramid analogy once more, the audience has no idea of the pyramid's height (pointiness) in comparison to the ideal apex. If we cannot express the certainty or range of our assessments, we can hardly expect our principals to have what they need to make the right decisions. A non-estimating analyst tells the principal that their "guess is as good as mine" even though the analyst had the advantage of reviewing the judgment's supporting facts and assumptions in detail (Figure 6).

The Three Keys to Improve Decision Making via Discussion

Well-structured, predictive, and estimative assessments improve decision making by generating productive discussion within the organization. A clear statement such as "we assess with low confidence the enemy will attack along avenue of approach one with 2 to 3 tank companies" or "we assess with high confidence the fielding of weapon X by country Y will lead to regional conflict in 6 to 12 months" will no doubt raise important questions from the principal or staff. These questions might include—

✦ Why this confidence level or that range?

✦ Why these assumptions?

- ✦ What alternate hypothesis are we not considering here?
- ✦ What can be done to improve our position?

Feedback and follow-on actions (new analysis or collection) provide the information necessary to narrow the range of an assessment with an even greater level of confidence.[36] This iterative process results in an increasingly defined set of COAs by stripping away the impossible.[37]

Your Role in the Assessment Production Process

So, what role do YOU play in the assessment production process? If you are an analyst, incorporate the three keys into your main assessments (obviously). For everyone else, I see two priorities:

First—Increase Opportunities for Discussion. If you are an analyst, your role is to serve as an informal sounding board and critic of your fellow analysts' work. Supervisors enact a formal team and section review process to further increase the number of discussion iterations before briefing the assessment to the principal and staff. Formal review processes should use checklists—a tactic almost "ridiculous in its simplicity" to avoid disaster.[38] Fortunately, ATP 2-33.4, *Intelligence Analysis*, provides a wealth of analysis evaluation tools to incorporate into your checklists (for example, step 7, Evaluate analysis, in Table 9-1, Analytic design to tactical intelligence analysis crosswalk, shows a list of doctrinal concepts and references to apply in your review process).[39] However, as argued here, although analysts need to deal with the smaller details and advanced techniques in ATP 2-33.4, they must first master the obvious three keys.

Step 7, Evaluate Analysis
Doctrinal Concepts and References[40]

ATP 2-33.4:

- ✦ Answer the '*so what*' from the commander's perspective, par. 1-21.
- ✦ Determine relevancy before producing assessments, par. 1-27.
- ✦ Appendix B, *Cognitive Considerations for Intelligence Analysts*. (This appendix describes thinking abilities, critical and creative thinking, and avoiding analytical pitfalls.)
- ✦ Appendix C, *Analytic Standards and Analysis Validation*. (This appendix discusses the analytic standards that govern intelligence analysis.)

Second—Check Our Analytic Ego at the Door. The purpose of intelligence is to support the right decision, not to provide the right answer. Although careful analysis can reduce uncertainty, Sherman Kent's ideal apex is not likely to be reached for anything other than the simplest questions or just before an event occurs. Therefore, no analyst, team, or supervisor should ever feel wedded to an assessment. Additionally, no person has so much expertise on a topic that they would not benefit from the insight obtained from a diverse group. Woe to the intelligence section that sends an unchallenged, non-estimative best guess to a principal so as not to upset someone's ego. Artistic freedom is a thing; analytic freedom is not. Encourage analytic humility.

Putting It All Together—An Example Assessment with the Three Keys

I will now combine all three keys into the following simple assessment to demonstrate their use in a large-scale combat situation:

We assess with high confidence **(confidence level)** the 311BTG reinforced by 2–4 tank companies **(range)** attacks to seize objectives (OBJs) BULL and LION along avenue of approach (AA)1 in order to enable the seizure of the BIG BEND DAM **(prediction)**. **[ARGUMENT MAIN IDEA]** The attack will almost certainly **(likelihood)** commence in the next 24–48 hours **(range)** due to weather conditions favoring the offense **(prediction)**. **[SUPPORTING FACT]** Forward reconnaissance elements and single-source intelligence reports indicate the movement east of no less than two plus tank companies and possible, supporting artillery to 311BTG staging areas and battle positions 15 kilometers west of OBJ BULL along AA1. **[SUPPORTING FACT]** Coalition forces to our south report minimal enemy activity along AA2. **[SUPPORTING FACT]** Additionally, enemy reconnaissance elements were just observed in the vicinity of BIG BEND DAM. **[SUPPORTING FACT]** We assume the seizure of the BIG BEND DAM will provide political justification for the enemy offensive. **[ASSUMPTION]** These well-corroborated reports strongly affirm that the reinforced 311BTG is committed to the imminent seizure of BIG BEND DAM along AA1, but they do not preclude the possibility of a surprise attack along AA2. **[CONCLUSION]**.[41]

This clear assessment provides the friendly commander with the right intelligence at the right time. Remove any of the three keys and the strength of the argument drops considerably. Based on the assessment and the follow-on discussion, we would expect the commander to be capable of providing the necessary guidance to confirm and then effectively counter the enemy COA. In other words, we expect a winning decision.

The Great Secret

At this point, you likely realize the great secret to a well-developed assessment is no more than a common-sense statement of the obvious (Figure 7, on the next page). That is okay because you are in good company. BG Oscar Koch, who served as the G-2 for GEN George Patton in World War II, remarked that an important quality of an intelligence officer is "an abundance of honest-to-goodness, matter-of-fact, feet-on-the-ground common sense!"[42]
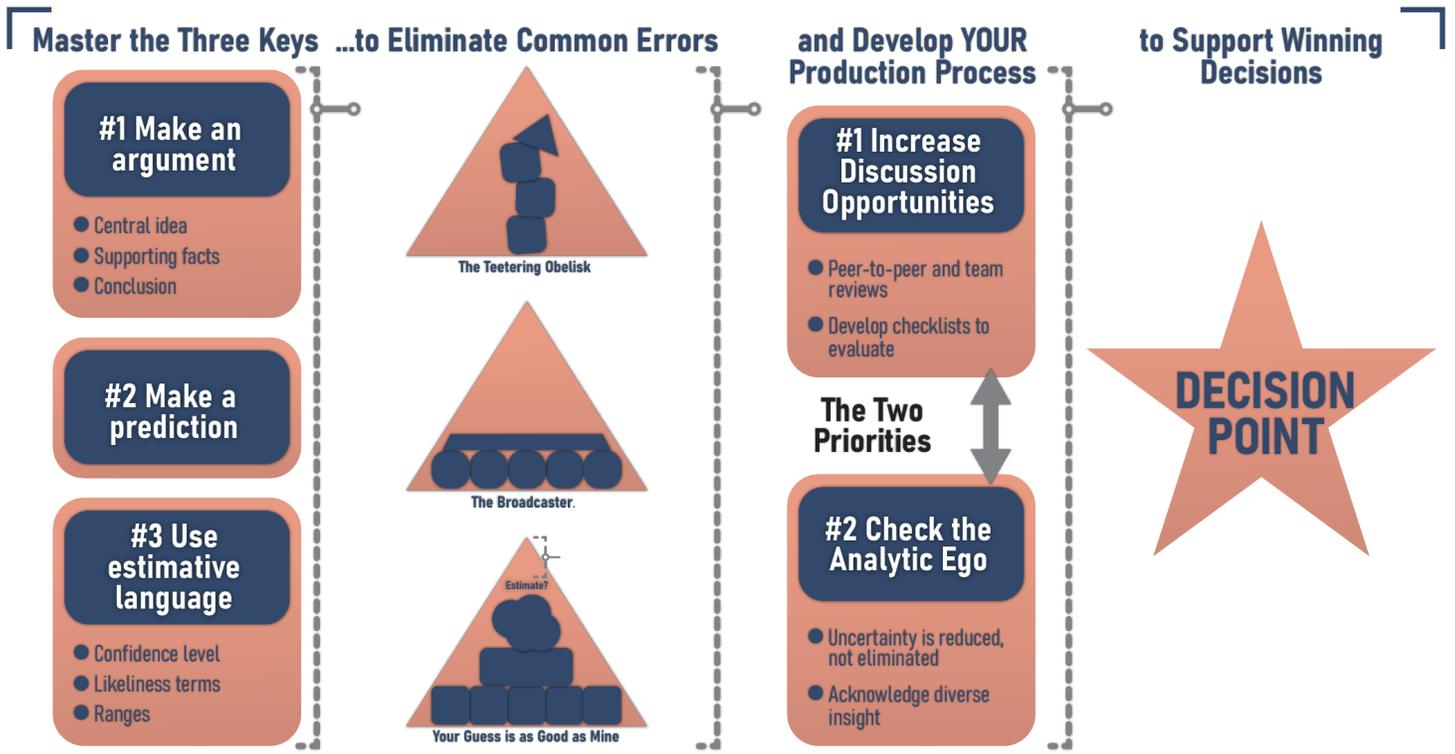
Master the Three Keys **...to Eliminate Common Errors** **and Develop YOUR Production Process** **to Support Winning Decisions**

#1 Make an argument
- Central idea
- Supporting facts
- Conclusion

The Teetering Obelisk

#2 Make a prediction

The Broadcaster.

#3 Use estimative language
- Confidence level
- Likeliness terms
- Ranges

Estimate?

Your Guess is as Good as Mine

#1 Increase Discussion Opportunities
- Peer-to-peer and team reviews
- Develop checklists to evaluate

The Two Priorities

#2 Check the Analytic Ego
- Uncertainty is reduced, not eliminated
- Acknowledge diverse insight

DECISION POINT

Figure 7. The Great Secret to a Well-Developed Assessment[43]

Conclusion

If your main assessment always makes a clear argument, makes a prediction, and uses estimative language, then continue to strive for superior analytic rigor using the advanced details and techniques in ATP 2-33.4. If your assessments are hit or miss in these areas, focus on mastering the three keys and the two assessment production priorities to generate the discussion needed to support better decision making *now*. In the future, maybe you will be asked a question like "What makes you so sure they are going north?" before it is too late. ✳

Endnotes

1. Michael A. Turner, *Why Secret Intelligence Fails* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2006), x–xi.

2. Natasha Turak, Abigail Ng, and Amanda Macias, " 'Intelligence failure of the highest order'—How Afghanistan fell to the Taliban so quickly," CNBC, 18 August 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/16/how-afghanistan-fell-to-the-taliban-so-quickly.html. The authors attribute the quotation to Bill Roggio, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

3. Dan John, *Attempts: Essays on Fitness, Health, Longevity and Easy Strength* (Aptos, CA: On Target Publications, 2020), 21–29. I quote Dan John's term *greatest secret*. J. Edward Russo and Paul J. H. Schoemaker, *Winning Decisions: Getting it Right the First Time* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 2002), xii. I quote Russo and Schoemaker's term *winning decision*.

4. Russo and Schoemaker, *Winning Decisions*, xii.

5. John, *Attempts*, 21–29. Obviously, Dan John does not comment on intelligence production, but I adapted his argument that we should first "embrace the obvious" in our endeavors or risk failure. Department of the Army, Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 2-33.4, *Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 10 January 2020), C-2.

6. John, *Attempts*, 26.

7. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 2-0, *Joint Intelligence* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 22 May 2022), iii-7.

8. For example, the *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* defines *commander's estimate* as an "initial assessment" and defines *battle damage assessment* as an "estimate of damage." JP 2-0, *Joint Intelligence*, defines *intelligence estimate* as an "appraisal." Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington DC: The Joint Staff, May 2022), 24, 41; and Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 2-0, *Joint Intelligence*, GL-16.

9. Sherman Kent, *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays*, ed. Donald P. Steury (Washington, DC: History Staff, Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1994), 35.

10. Ibid., 36.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 37.

13. Kent, *Collected Essays*, 36–38.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid. (emphasis added)

16. Graphic by author, using information from Kent, *Collected Essays*, 35–39.

17. Ibid.

18. Kent, *Collected Essays*, 35–39.

19. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "argument (*n.*)," accessed 24 January 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/argument; and Jolyon Dodgson, "Argumentative Paragraph Writing," Excellent-Proofreading-and-Writing.com, accessed 24 January 2022, https://www.excellent-proofreading-and-writing.com/argumentative-paragraph.html. This description is adapted from *Merriam-Webster* and Excellent-Proofreading-and-Writing.com.

20. Graphic by author, using information from Kent, *Collected Essays*, 35–39.

21. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 2-0, *Joint Intelligence*, I-2.

22. Dodgson, "Argumentative Paragraph Writing."

23. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 2-0, *Joint Intelligence*, I-2.

24. Kent, *Collected Essays*, 38.

25. Russo and Schoemaker, *Winning Decisions*, 107–108. I use the authors' concept of ranges (and their benefits). I focus on the obvious, but Russo and Schoemaker's work offers a wealth of tools to improve decision making.

26. Department of the Army, ATP 2-33.4, *Intelligence Analysis*, C-2.

27. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 2-0, *Joint Intelligence*, A-3.

28. Graphic by author, using information from Kent, *Collected Essays*, 35–39.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Department of the Army, ATP 2-33.4, *Intelligence Analysis*, C-1–C-2.

32. Russo and Schoemaker, *Winning Decisions*, 107–108.

33. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "range (*n*.)," accessed 24 January 2022, https://www.meriam-webster.com/dictionary/range; and Russo and Schoemaker, *Winning Decisions*, 107–108.

34. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Intelligence Community Directive 203: Analytic Standards* (Washington, DC, 2 January 2015), 3.

35. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 2-0, *Joint Intelligence*, I-1.

36. Russo and Schoemaker, *Winning Decisions*, 107–108.

37. Kent, *Collected Essays*, 36.

38. Atul Gawande, *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right* (New York: Picador, 2011), 13.

39. Department of the Army, ATP 2-33.4, *Intelligence Analysis*, 9-8.

40. Ibid.

41. Example adapted from Department of the Army, ATP 2-33.4, *Intelligence Analysis*, 8-1–8-3; and Matthew Fontaine, "Enemy Course of Action Development," *Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin* 45, no. 4 (October–December 2019): 23–27.

42. Oscar W. Koch and Robert G. Hays, *G-2: Intelligence for Patton* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 1999), 124.

43. Compilation by author, using various sources cited in the article.

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