Chapter 1

Who Are Your Clients?

Setting the Stage

The importance of pausing at the start of a job or a project to identify explicitly the primary recipient of your analysis cannot be overstated. When preparing a briefing, the answer to the question, "Who are your clients?" is usually obvious, although you may need to target your presentation to a larger group with several subsets of clients, interests, and desired outcomes.[1] When writing a product, however, this step is often overlooked—and the cost to analysts and their organizations can be substantial.[2]

The raison d'être for analysts and analytic organizations is to bring a broad range of information to bear on difficult questions, select that which is most significant, then tailor and package it for decision makers. These functions are similar for analysts whether they work in national security, homeland security, law enforcement, or private industry.

Most clients, however, have much more on their minds than absorbing the details and historical data in which analysts are immersed. Successful analysts translate their expertise into forms that "sing" to busy clients and respond to their needs and interests without them having to ask. The first step is to understand the clients' responsibilities, problems, pressures, and preferences as receivers of information. This is often best accomplished by establishing a working relationship with the client that allows for more informal interaction and feedback.

Looking More Deeply

As you begin a new job and read to familiarize yourself with the subject matter, make a list or draw a diagram of those who are interested in or will be counting on your analysis to help them carry out their responsibilities. This client base will guide the questions you formulate, the information you seek and monitor, and the products you generate. Most of your analyses should be targeted at a specific client, but you may prepare reports intended for large audiences interested in your organization's authoritative judgment. The more specific you can be in defining the individuals or positions you support, the better. Be sure to include those in your chain of command as well as those outside your organization who receive your products.

As a working-level analyst, you probably know something about your clients from the media, have learned about them from colleagues, or have met or briefed some of them in person. Ideally, you have established a process that allows you to engage with them in person or electronically to identify their most pressing needs, better scope their requirements, and obtain feedback on the value of the analysis you have provided. When beginning a project, make every effort to visualize those for whom you are preparing your briefing or paper or electronic product and what they will be doing as a result of your analytic conclusions. The one thing they most likely have in common is insufficient time for processing and absorbing all the data they need to make effective decisions. They are counting on you to do some of the thinking and anticipating for them, giving them insights so they can "grab it and go."

Understanding Busy Clients

The more senior your clients, the broader their scope of responsibilities and the less time they will have to read your analysis. Senior clients share several characteristics that you should take into consideration in your products and other support.

- *Their time is limited and precious.* Senior clients might be given a hundred pages of information to read each morning. You should expect them to move quickly through volumes, keying off words that catch their attention and interest. Your products should be focused and easily digestible with a prominent "So What" that points the clients to the implications and options for decisions they will make.

- *They depend on you to prioritize what is important.* Your selection of topics helps clients manage their time and focus their intellectual energies on what is most critical. The human brain, however, can follow only a limited number of topics at any given time. Do not assume your clients read or remember previous products. A good strategy is to insert simple graphics or provide supporting or explanatory data in a separate text box.

- *They expect transparency in your facts and your analysis.* Source Summaries and the rationale behind why you know what you know and how you came to your conclusions create the backdrop for your clients' acceptance or rejection of your work. The need for such transparency is even more important if you expect your clients will disagree with your analysis. Some clients will simply disregard your hard work, but others may stop to rethink the issue. If you do not present clear argumentation, however, you may never know if you missed the opportunity to change their thinking or inform their knowledge base.

- *They "use" information from "trusted" analysts and organizations.* Your organization's "brand name" can determine the weight your clients give to your products. Just as we develop preferences for credible service providers, information

sources, and commercial products, clients pay more attention to the producers they believe are more thoughtful, reliable, and accurate.

- *You are only one source of their information flow.* Busy executives—from generals to cabinet officials to chief executive officers—have multiple sources of information, many of whom may be closer to the issue than you are. Never assume you are the only or even the most knowledgeable source; know what you have that is different from others.

Preparing Yourself to Serve Busy Clients

Whether you are an intelligence analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Chicago Police Department, the UK National Cyber Security Centre, Citibank, or Walmart, you have prepared yourself for an analytic position by at least earning academic credentials and probably building perspective through developmental experiences, such as military service, government or industry internships, or foreign study. These are the essential foundations to help you get the opportunity to demonstrate and develop your analytic "chops," but you also need to be aware of the internal, cognitive characteristics that will help you successfully serve your organization and your clients.

Mindfulness

In recent years, the practice of mindfulness has become a growing movement in institutions ranging from universities to prisons, but self-awareness and the ability to distinguish one's personal experience from observation of the external world has long been a hallmark of the best analysts. This awareness—attention and acceptance—of our thoughts and feelings, without placing a value of rightness or wrongness on them, is fundamental to freeing our minds both to observe what is actually happening in the situation we are analyzing and to envision the alternatives and possibilities that can explain the past, present, and future before inserting what we know into the conceptual framework.

The popularity of this integration of Zen Buddhist teaching with scientific findings stems from University of Massachusetts medical professor Jon Kabat-Zinn's design of programs to reduce stress, anxiety, and pain but has strong application in professional as well as personal life.[3]

Kabat-Zinn asserts that the "key to being open" entails "holding judgment at bay while envisioning the problem and possibilities, before fitting known information into the frame"[4] (see Chapter 3 for Gary Klein's data/frame concept of "sensemaking"). The practice of mindfulness brings discipline to the starting point in much the same way as the practice of Structured Analytic Techniques does throughout the critical thinking process. In mindfulness terminology, this "beginner's mind" helps overcome "minds that are so full of expertise" that they leave "little room for novelty or freshness" (see Chapter 12 for Rob Johnston's model for building analytic expertise).

> *"This means that we will cultivate discernment, the capacity to see what is unfolding, to understand it with clarity, wisdom, understanding the interconnections between things, noticing the tendency to recognize judgment and recognize that it creates a veil or filter in front of our eyes . . . that is practically blinding to us."*
>
> —Jon Kabat-Zinn
> "The Dharma Foundations of Mindfulness in the Mainstream: The Art and the Science of MBSR and Other Mindfulness-Based Programs"

The goal of "not judging the judging" is to balance our thinking and the brain's natural tendency to come to *premature closure*, forming opinions that are often bipolar—"this" or "that," "good" or "bad." Kabat-Zinn advocates developing the mindfulness disciplines through guided meditation and practice of seven foundational attitudes, several of which you will see reflected in the discussions of analytic skills development throughout this book:

1. *Non-judging.* Recognizing judgments so you can assess them more clearly.
2. *Patience.* Appreciating the present moment, understanding that things unfold in their own time.
3. *Beginner's mind.* Seeing the world through fresh eyes, opening the door to creativity and clarity.
4. *Trust.* Consciously assessing the degree to which we can trust what we see, think, and perceive.
5. *Non-striving.* Recognizing that goals can be achieved by backing off and focusing on the present.
6. *Acceptance.* Willingly seeing and coming to terms with things the way they really are.
7. *Letting go.* Letting things be the way they really are.[4]

Trust

Mindfulness refers to the idea of "trust" in terms of how you trust yourself and your thinking, but trust also refers to whether and how much your clients trust and therefore depend on and use your analysis. Stephen Covey[5] lays out a mental model with five "waves" of trust ranging through self, relationships, organization, market, and society that he likens to concentric ripples in water because "trust always flows from the inside-out."

All the waves provide context for the role and impact of analytic products, but analysts need to focus primarily on the first two. The extensive literature on trust provides a variety of ways to categorize the components of trust; for our purposes, the simplest way is to think of trust as a function of capability and credibility.

- *Capability* means that you have developed the knowledge, skills, and abilities (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of analytic competencies) to add value in your assessment of the issues for which you are responsible. It is measured based on your track record of products, judgments, and assessments and their utility to your clients.

- *Credibility* is built based on that track record but also by your clients' perception of your honesty, integrity, and intent. Do you do what you say you will do in serving your clients? Do you or your products have a bias or hidden agenda that diminishes their overall value and utility?

Covey identifies thirteen behaviors associated with "high-trust leaders" that apply equally to professional analysts and rest on the foundation of consistent action. In contentious environments—either dealing with other analysts, managers, or decision makers (see Chapters 6 and 14)—these behaviors may be challenging to exhibit but are the only way to bridge differences and attempt to establish a common focus on the potential meanings of observable data.

- Talk straight
- Show respect
- Be transparent
- Right wrongs
- Show loyalty
- Deliver results
- Get better
- Confront reality
- State expectations
- Be accountable
- Listen first
- Meet commitments
- Extend trust

The good news is that research on trust indicates that humans are physically hardwired to trust others. Malcolm Gladwell in *Talking to Strangers*[6] writes that we naturally default to believing another person is telling the truth because the benefits of trust usually outweigh the risks of being burned. To avoid negative consequences, he advocates exercising mindfulness and several of the traits that should be commonplace in analysts—careful listening, not reading too much into words or gestures of those who might be deceptive, and never rushing to judgment (see Chapter 9 for a further discussion of Gladwell's writing on how this natural tendency impacts our ability to detect deception).

The bad news for analysts, however, is that other research[7] suggests that the more status, power, and wealth individuals have, the less they trust others and the less trustworthy they are. Analysts should strive to build trust with clients, but they should expect that their efforts will not always meet with success. This is why analysts need to be

particularly adept at assessing client needs and priorities that will at least demonstrate credibility through their professional tradecraft.

A Growth Mindset

Previous discussions make clear that our analytic workspace is not set in stone—it changes, and we must develop the skills and mindset to grow with it. While one of our colleagues famously said that "good analysts are born and not made," we believe that each of us can improve the analytic skills and predilections with which we were born. Psychologist Carol Dweck[8] helps us understand that our mindset makes a critical difference in whether we believe we can change our abilities and grow.

Table 1.1 ▪ Comparing Fixed and Growth Mindsets

Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
Seeks validation	Seeks development
Sees failures as disasters	Sees failures as opportunities
Avoids challenges	Relishes challenges

Source: Adapted from Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Random House Digital, 2008).

People with a *growth mind*set believe they can develop expertise in anything if they just work hard enough. Those with a *fixed mindset*, in contrast, are convinced that their natural abilities are all they have (see Table 1.1). At the extremes of these mindsets, the former pass through life learning new skills, evolving relationships, and continually developing, while the latter are continually trying to prove themselves and get stuck when they fail, avoiding accountability and blaming others. These mindsets appear as soon as children begin to evaluate themselves—one of Dweck's experiments was with four-year-olds—with those demonstrating fixed mindsets being reluctant to take on challenges and afraid of not looking smart.

Analysis demands mental stretching to keep pace with the clients being served, the world being interpreted, and the tools being used. According to Dweck, if you believe you can develop yourself, you are more likely to seek accurate information because you are looking for ways to improve and impact your performance and environment. She notes that you can learn to adopt a growth mindset.

Influence

Analysis without impact wastes both intellectual effort and organizational resources, so it is natural and expected that analysts should seek to understand what they can do to maximize the influence or effect that their analysis has on their clients' thinking and actions. Babson professor Allan Cohen and Stanford business professor David

Bradford's model for "influence without authority"[9] was devised for the business world but has strong applicability to building the analyst–client relationship. They contend that influence is based on exchange—in this case, technically competent analysts provide intelligence assessments that help their clients succeed at their jobs. In return, analysts receive feedback—whether directly or indirectly from clients or their chain of command—that informs and enhances their ability to succeed at their analytic tasks.

Cohen and Bradford's six-step model for gaining influence underscores the critical importance not only of knowing your client but understanding the value of what you provide and how you can maximize your impact:

1. Consider everyone as a potential friend and ally.
2. Clearly identify and define your objectives and priorities.
3. See the world through the eyes of those you seek to influence.
4. Find out what other people value and what you can offer in exchange. Know also precisely what you value and will accept.
5. Understand your relationship with those you want to influence and what kind of relationship they want.
6. Exercise influence through a process of mutual exchange and mutual benefit.

Cohen and Bradford encourage developing strategies to respond to clients' needs but warn of several pitfalls, including the following:

- Failure to plan ahead, accurately gauge what the client really needs, or account for changes in situations or priorities
- Attachment to your own assessments, even in the face of change
- Overplaying what you can deliver or the significance of your information
- Diffidence in offering information or services that might be of value for fear they will not be accepted

Empathy

The most valuable analysts view issues from their clients' perspectives, empathetically "seeing the world through others' eyes." Excellent salespeople or managers are empathetic because they recognize and respond to the needs of clients or subordinates. They are easy to approach and probably approach you first with interest in your wants and needs. They "get it right," making you feel they understand you even if they do not have the color shirt you want or are unable to accommodate a request to shift time sched-

ules. Empathy is at the core of successful social interactions, facilitating communication, trust, and cooperation.

Box 1.1 "Rational Compassion": Empathizing With Your Clients and Coworkers

Here are some steps you can take to build empathy with your work colleagues and clients:

- **Listen actively.** If we focus on clarifying what we see or believe is needed rather than judging, then we can move more quickly toward broadly applicable solutions. Active listening implies we are paying attention to others and can repeat, paraphrase using similar words, or reflect on what we have heard using our own words to express key messages.
- **Take personal responsibility for improvement.** Those who are "stress hardy" exhibit three characteristics:
  1. Commitment (rather than alienation) that gives passion and purpose to their lives
  2. Perception of challenges as opportunities
  3. Willingness to devote time and energy to situations over which they have some control or influence
- **Ask clear, forward-looking questions about things that matter.** Try to define the problem or issue with the following questions:
  1. Address a specific need containing the actionable "So What." What will someone do with your solution, and what is the impact?
  2. Include the specifics of the issue: Who? What? How? When? Where? and Why? Think about the difference between process and substance in your solutions: Will things be better by doing them in a different way, by looking at the problem differently based on the data, or both?
  3. Fit into one sentence. Can you capture the bottom line in a simple, crisp sentence?
  4. Have an answer, at least theoretically, or options. The best questions are puzzles and not mysteries. For example, what I had for breakfast this morning is a puzzle that someone else can figure out. It happened; there are clues. What I will have for breakfast a week from now is a mystery because even I do not know. Do you need to consider or present alternative explanations?
- **Track and collect accurate data.** Ensure that you have good sources for your data. Read the speeches or statements from leaders within your organization or that relate to your problems; be familiar with the laws, regulations, and policies that underlie your organization's operations; and pay attention to the surveys, assessments, and reports that provide the data that can strengthen your arguments.

Source: Suzanne Kobasa, Salvatore R. Maddi, and Stephen Kahn, "Hardiness and Health: A Prospective Study," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 42 (January 1982): 168–177.

How do you know if you are empathetic? Psychologists have entire workshops on assessing and developing capacities for empathy, but here is the shorthand answer: empathetic people may more accurately sense how they are perceived by others because they intuit another's perception of them and adjust their behaviors so they are seen in ways they want to be seen. The interconnection of this concept with mindfulness, trust, growth mindset, and influence provides analysts with more food for thought on consciously planning how they can develop their capacity to understand their client.

Empathy has both cognitive and emotional components, the latter of which Yale psychologist Paul Bloom[10] notes limits its usefulness and can lend to the dangerous reinforcement of mindsets. "Cognitive empathy" allows for the understanding of another's circumstances without having to actually emotionally "feel their pain." For instance, doctors should rationally care about their patients but should not become emotionally empathetic. Bloom advocates a "rational compassion" that brings an aware, reflective attitude of affiliation that holds out for skeptical consideration of knee-jerk or biased reactions (see Box 1.1).

A growing amount of research indicates that empathy might even create boundaries by hardening our ability to see all sides of an issue or situation. Scholars hypothesize that the strength of empathizing with one side—which may be attractive or similar to the empathizer—may actually create antipathy toward the "out side." The fear is that empathy could be "tearing us apart."[11] One study[12] showed that those who scored high on an empathy scale also had higher levels of "affective polarization"—the difference between the rating they gave their political party as opposed to the opposing party—and were more prone to *schadenfreude*, or taking pleasure at the other side's misfortune.

Assessing Client Needs

The best technique for gauging your clients' needs is to put yourself in their shoes through Red Hat Analysis,[13] focusing on their responsibilities and interests. The more you internalize their priorities, burdens, and goals, the better you can discern the questions they need addressed and target your analytic responses. The following questions can help guide your assessment:

1. *What is their role?* Your clients' responsibilities are the most important input to determining the analytic products that will help them do their jobs. Do they deal with specific issues or geographic areas? What kind of analysis are they looking for—a compendium of facts, an evaluation of developments, or a projection of future trends? Who do they report to, what decisions must they make, and who do they serve? In Washington, for example, senior government officials respond to their cabinet secretary, the White House, Congress, and the media. In corporations, executives may have to respond to stockholders or product consumers as well as to their own chain of command.

2. *What are their interests?* Be alert for hints about client interests in all your interactions, meetings, and readings. Are they seeking specific data that supports their current policies or asking you to help frame the problem for them? If you are fortunate to have firsthand contact with your clients, they may tell you about their interests. More likely, you will have to figure it out by reaching out to their staff, briefers, or your chain of command. You can learn a lot by reading press reports, congressional testimony, websites, and other sources and analytic reports. Once you know the decision maker's interest, you can determine why the issue is important; whether the issue is an opportunity, threat, or decision point; and how best to shape your response.

> *"Twenty-first century analysts will need to become less independent and neutral in favor of greater tailoring to customer needs."*
>
> *—Carmen Medina*
> *"What to Do When Traditional Models Fail: The Coming Revolution in Intelligence Analysis"*

Calendars are an excellent source of information about what is driving clients' immediate concerns. Are they preparing for a meeting or trip or for negotiations rather than just following an issue? How does your analysis affect those preparations?

Your analysis should focus on clients' core interests while addressing other concerns in the broader context. Some argue that analysts' focus should be on the specific, hard questions of their primary clients rather than on simply tracking developments on their account. This means analysts would start their days by reviewing feedback and tasking from clients rather than first reading the morning traffic.

3. *What is their expertise?* Understanding the depth of clients' knowledge of the topic is critical in crafting analytic responses. This level of knowledge will determine whether terms need definition, how much evidence is needed to support claims and judgments, whether historical details should be included, and how much context is necessary. For example, clients who are already experts in their fields require only quick turnaround information about a new development. In these instances, analysts need to focus on how they can best add value in an era of information abundance. Other clients are generalists who will need more context and often a full introduction to an unfamiliar topic.

In some cases, your clients may have firsthand knowledge of a situation or a personality that varies from what you portray in your analysis. You should expect probing

questions and disagreements from your most knowledgeable clients. Prepare for this by ensuring that your sources and judgments are carefully selected and accurately portrayed (see Chapter 6 for dealing with analytic disagreements).

In both situations, informing the policymaker or decision maker about unknowns, uncertainties, and contradictory information is essential to meeting the client's needs. As Carmen Medina, a former deputy director for intelligence at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), noted, "The analysts' real value increasingly will lie in identifying discontinuities that shatter precedents and trends."[14] Moreover, client needs and preferences change rapidly, as does the environment in which analysis operates, requiring analysts to constantly reassess how best they can respond to clients' needs.

4. *How do they absorb information?* The President's Daily Brief, produced by the Director of National Intelligence, for example, changes with each president to reflect the chief executive's information-processing preferences, tolerance for detail, and interest in intelligence. Does the client prefer to receive information written or orally? Should the product be short or long, in paragraphs or bullets, with few or many graphics, delivered in hard copy, on a tablet, or as an infographic?

5. *What is the interaction with your organization?* Did the client ask a question? Are you trying to educate, convince, or alert? Is there an action to be taken or options to be considered? Intelligence analysts in national security do not formulate or recommend policy but should be aware of circumstances in which they can alert their clients to opportunities for beneficial action or avoidance of danger.

Analysts should always seek to know the circumstances for a request, even if they do not get a clear response in return. It helps to know if the client is responding to a crisis, a strategic challenge, or an ongoing issue. Are requesters seeking to learn more about a new situation, or are they already well informed and just checking to ensure they have full command of the most recent facts and analysis before making a decision?

If you are concerned that the question you have been given is poorly formulated or just plain wrong, seek clarification before drafting your response. Often a question will be reinterpreted or revised multiple times as it moves down the chain of command. Try to reach back to the initial source—preferably directly or through institutional channels if necessary—to seek clarification. Answering the wrong question is a waste of everyone's time.

6. *What other sources of information do they consult?* Do the clients read specific publications or watch certain news channels? To which blogs or news feeds do they subscribe? Do they have experts in your field on their staff who filter or explain your analysis for them? This is a particular challenge for analysts who

write on technical topics; your clients may rely on others to interpret your material rather than reading it themselves.

Box 1.2 Knowing Your Client Checklist

The following questions will help you explore how best to serve your ultimate client:

1. Who is the key person for whom the product is being developed?
2. Will this product answer the question the client asked? Did the client ask the right question, or is it more important to place your answer in a broader context?
3. What is the most important message to give this client? What value-added contribution can you make?
4. How is the client expected to use this information?
5. How much time does the client have to digest your product?
6. What format would convey the information most effectively?
7. Is it possible to capture the essence of your message in one or a few key graphics?
8. What is the client's level of tolerance for technical language and detail? Can you provide details in backup materials, graphics, or an annex?
9. Does distribution of this document need to be restricted? What classification or handling caveats are most appropriate? Should you prepare different products at different levels of restriction?
10. Would the client expect you to reach out to other experts for assistance in answering this question? If so, how would you flag their contribution in presenting your product?
11. To whom might the client turn for other views on this topic? What data or analysis might others provide that could influence how the client will react to what you are preparing?
12. What perspectives do other interested parties have on this issue? What are the responsibilities of the other parties?

Do you have concerns about the sensitivity of your information and how it might be used? Could that have an impact on your analysis or use of sources?

7. *What will your client do with your information and insights?* The actions that will be taken based on your work help determine the questions you will answer, the level of detail you will include, and the frequency or turnaround for your products. Imagine what reactions you would have if you were in the client's job receiving your analysis, and consider what actions you might take. You can categorize these projected actions along a set of dimensions, such as

inaction to *action, indirect* to *direct*, or *positive* to *negative*, to develop a second sense for the potential impact your analysis might have. Your understanding of the broader context within which you perform your analysis (see Chapter 3) will improve your ability to empathize with your clients and craft products that respond to their needs.

Do not get swept away in the quest for the perfect prediction; we are convinced this is an exercise in futility. The principal goal of analysis is to properly frame the problem, accept that multiple outcomes are possible, and help the decision maker better understand the underlying forces, factors, or key drivers that are most likely to shape the outcome. Only if policymakers and decision makers are armed with that knowledge can they perform their roles effectively.

Box 1.2 provides a simple client checklist analysts can use to ensure that they have considered all aspects of a client's needs. The checklist helps focus attention on what matters most and generate a rigorous response to the task at hand.

8. *Can you bound the problem to tell clients what they do not need to worry about?* Analysts often ignore the strategy of focusing clients on what is most important by telling them what is *not* important. Busy people value being told what issues will not require their attention. Some of the most positive feedback the authors received from senior policymakers at the cabinet and subcabinet levels came when we provided analysis on why a government was unlikely to fall or a particular situation was unlikely to devolve into a crisis.

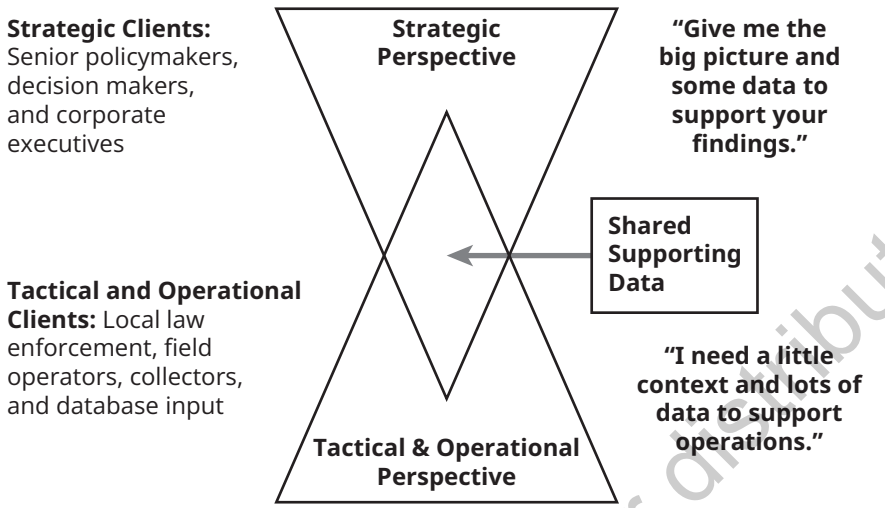
Identifying Key Clients

When starting to work on a specific project, list your principal client and what he or she might do as a result of reading your analysis. This will start you on the right foot by establishing a clear focus up front and enabling detailed discussions about your analytic plan of attack with your supervisors, reviewers, and mentors.

In some cases, your analysis will be geared toward serving a variety of clients. At the Department of Homeland Security, for example, analysts usually have to address the needs of several very different clients—the secretary of Homeland Security, state and local law enforcement officials, private industry, and their intelligence community counterparts. A single document sent to a senior decision maker who is looking for a strategic perspective but also to a local law enforcement body that requires tactical information to perform its mission would end up frustrating both clients, as each would receive substantial information of little value to them (see Figure 1.1). In these circumstances, analysts should consider drafting two or more distinct products tailored to the specific needs of each client or customer set.

In general, researching, drafting, and sourcing different products for each client or customer set can be accomplished most efficiently as a parallel process. Simultaneous

Figure 1.1 ▪ Tailoring Products to Best Serve Clients



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production of tailored products helps the author address the specific—and sometimes unique—needs of each client and helps ensure that each client receives the information of greatest value.

Expectations for Feedback

Busy clients are consumed with responding to multiple demands on their time and are focused on their problems rather than on providing feedback to their analytic support. Many analytic organizations structure themselves to solicit and receive feedback from readers of assessments and periodic publications. But analysts rarely get as much feedback as they would like, particularly from their most senior clients. Formal surveys that seek periodic, written feedback have rarely proved to be effective, and reliance on an interviewing process can be overly time-consuming. Two mechanisms that offer more promise are for the analyst to attend regularly scheduled staff meetings hosted by the client or to arrange for periodic briefings of the client. In some circumstances, an informal dialogue can be pursued over email, but in-person contact almost always ensures more effective communication while building trust.

We urge analysts to keep in mind that our brains are wired to overestimate the impact of our analysis on others and for decision makers to underestimate the value of analytic support of their decision processes. Be thrilled when you get a compliment and pleased when you have evidence your analyses have been read. If you put yourselves in your busy clients' shoes, you will understand why their feedback can be sporadic and

sparse. Your objective should be to provide analysis of sufficient value that your clients keep coming back asking for more.

Key Takeaways

- When starting work on a new issue or account, analysts should take a moment to identify the client base and how the various users will apply and benefit from the analysis.
- These few minutes of reflection will result in a more focused product that will move more quickly through the editing and coordination processes.
- Busy clients have limited time to read analysis, depend on analytic products to help focus their attention on what is important, and expect transparency in facts and sourcing.
- Analysts can build empathy by understanding their clients' roles, interests, expertise, information processing, and predilection for action.
- The goal of analysis is to properly frame the problem, accept that multiple outcomes are possible, and help the decision maker better understand the underlying forces, factors, or key drivers that are most likely to shape the final outcome.
- Analysts should look for ways to tell clients what is not important and what they do not need to worry about.
- Specific projects should be directed to the principal client. If analysts need to support a varied client set on the same issue, they should consider simultaneous researching, drafting, and sourcing of parallel products tailored to each client or customer set.
- Analysts should explore ways to establish periodic contact with key clients to obtain effective informal feedback.

Considering the Case Study

Review Case Study I, "Uncharted Territory: Conflict, Competition, or Collaboration in the Arctic?"

- Do anticipated developments in the Arctic pose a serious threat—or offer significant opportunities—to the international community? To the organization for which you work?
- Who would you consider the principal client or clients in preparing a report on the future of the Arctic?

1. What would be the most important issues for senior policymakers to consider?
2. What would be the most important issues for senior defense planners to consider?

- Should the issue be posed as a threat, an opportunity, a key decision point, or some combination of these?
- Are there critical unknowns, uncertainties, or contradictory information that should be highlighted?

Chapter 2

What Are the Key Questions?

Setting the Stage

Most poorly written analysis lacks focus. The reader is left wondering, "What is the point of the product? Where are we going with this story? What is the thesis or the key argument?" A well-crafted analysis is tightly focused on a single primary message. The best way to formulate that message is to ensure that it responds to your clients' needs, answering thought-provoking questions that they are—or should be—asking. Questions stimulate and guide the analytic process, engaging and enabling interaction among analysts, reviewers, and clients to develop a message that will hit the target. Quite simply, questions beg for answers.

Articles on fast-breaking events should be directed to answering a single key intelligence or policy question. More extensive and less time-sensitive articles should be designed to answer a key question and several closely related subsidiary questions. In the government, Key Intelligence Questions (KIQs) guide analysts in their research, monitoring, and analytic production. These questions usually are more general and overarching than the ones you will generate to focus your products because they are used for a variety of purposes, including resource allocation and collection priorities. Nonetheless, they provide a good starting point for developing the questions and issues that you will address in your products. In business, analytic products should focus on a specific, well-defined issue.

> "In order for answers to become clear, the questions have to be clear."
> *—Abdulkarim Soroush, Islamic philosopher*[1]

Looking More Deeply

Often the key intelligence or policy question is provided by the client or your boss. In this case, you must understand exactly what is needed. Do not be shy about seeking

clarification if the question appears overly broad or poorly formulated. For example, a question that asks for "everything you know" about a particular subject is a disservice to both the analyst and the requester. These questions usually mask much more specific needs, but the requester has not had the time or does not have the knowledge to research, think, or articulate these needs.

You can save yourself, the requester, and all the editors substantial time over the long term by going back to determine exactly what these needs may be. Formulating a choice of questions that you believe might be applicable can spur requesters' thinking; yes-or-no answers are much easier to elicit than waiting for clients to have time to work their way through the problem themselves.

In some circumstances, you will find the question is specific, but the assumptions driving the question are unsupported. This places the analyst in a more difficult position. For example, prior to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, intelligence analysts were frequently asked, "Where are the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) hidden in Iraq?" This question assumed that the weapons did exist—an assumption that later proved to be false. If, in this instance, the analyst was uncertain the weapons existed, the best strategy would have been to place the original question in a broader context by rephrasing the question to read, "What is the status of the WMD program in Iraq?" In this way, the analyst still responds to the question posed by the requester but does so in a way that offers additional perspective on the issue.

If direct clarification from the requester is not possible, then the analyst's duty is to rephrase the question in a more meaningful way. Just as when you identified your client base (see Chapter 1), this is best accomplished by conducting your own Red Hat Analysis exercise[2] by putting yourself in the shoes of the requester and asking, "What exactly do I want to find out? What is my primary concern or interest?"

To do this well, particularly if you are new to the area of interest, you will have prepared for the Red Hat Analysis by asking essential and building block questions to understand your account:[3]

- **Essential questions** capture the core purposes for your analytic responsibilities. Are certain nations planning or carrying out disinformation campaigns against the United States? Are newly developed weapons systems able to harm targeted adversaries? Is the risk acceptable for your company to build a new facility or complete an agreement to work in countries undergoing political change?

- **Building-block questions** help establish the foundation or knowledge base you need to answer the essential question(s). These questions tend to be open ended or if closed ended, then the "yes/no" or factual answer suggests the need for elaboration. Building-block questions provide the basis for research, information collection, and monitoring: Which nations are suspected of carrying out disinformation campaigns? What tactics are they using? What are the tar-

gets? What do these elements tell us about the nations' intentions and objectives?

The concept of essential questions and building-block questions can be applied to any portfolio, account, issue, or subject worthy of analysis. Answering the following questions is a good way to start:

Why am I focusing on this issue or account?

- What is the essential question(s) I must consider?
- What are the building-block questions I must answer or monitor for each essential question?

Who is most interested in my issue/account?

- Is everyone interested in the same essential question?
- Do some only care about the building-block questions?

What do my clients "know" about the issue/account?

- What do the recipients care most about?
- What have we told them thus far?

The conflict in Ukraine provides a good example of the need to define the essential question as a first step in generating an analytic product. Sample essential questions (drafted in November 2024) that would define the purpose of the analysis are the following:

- How long will the conflict be extended?
- What resolution of the conflict would Ukraine find acceptable? What would Russia find acceptable?
- What are the political/military implications of Russia losing control over Crimea?
- What impact will the conflict have on Putin's ability to hold on to power?
- What are the key drivers that determined/will determine the resolution of the conflict?
- Are there other nations whose involvement might make a difference?

Some sample building-block questions (drafted in December 2024) include the following:

- What impact will weather have on the ongoing conflict?
- Will Russian troops maintain morale and be adequately equipped to engage in combat?
- What pressures will Putin experience to escalate/maintain/reduce his commitment to retaining control over eastern Ukraine?
- Will Zelensky continue to exhibit strong, unchallenged leadership?
- Will NATO support remain undiminished and effective?
- Will weapons technology and Ukraine's increased use of advanced weapons systems have a significant impact on the struggle?
- How much impact has/will cyber attacks have on the conflict?

Some other strategies for generating a set of key questions to focus the analysis include the following:

- *Scanning the environment to find out what others think about the subject.* What issues surface repeatedly in the media or government publications? What can you learn from agendas or notes from decision maker meetings? On what issues are other intelligence and policy organizations focusing?
- *Identifying trends.* What can you learn from available datasets like economic indicators, crime statistics, episodes of civil unrest, health statistics, or environmental indicators?
- *Engaging in Outside-In Thinking.*[4] How will developments outside an organization or not directly related to an issue affect it? Consider, for example, how the invention of cell phones and the internet have impacted our personal and professional lives—from making contact to accessing knowledge to shopping and elections. By the same token, developments such as in artificial intelligence merit the attention of all analysts who seek to understand the impact of "outside" drivers on "inside" issues.
- *Considering the "white space."* White space in publication design is empty or negative space that focuses visual attention on what is there. In so doing, it can help aim your attention toward what is known and what is important that is missing, poorly articulated, or not yet defined. White space provides the opportunity to reflect on what is missing or could be reframed to be more

relevant and valuable to your client. Analysts then can help bridge differences or advance understanding by addressing questions in new or different ways.

- *Brainstorming key questions.* MIT Leadership Center executive director Hal Gregersen advocates brainstorming with colleagues for questions instead of for answers[5] to energize thinking and yield unexpected insights. For intelligence organizations, this is a common technique for rethinking the KIQs that guide their research programs. The brainstorming can help identify better ways to frame issues, identify new or evolving drivers, and get beyond biases or established ways of approaching the issues. This becomes even more useful as analysts work more with generative AI applications (see Chapter 7 for generating AI prompts).

Five Characteristics of a Good Question

A good intelligence or policy question should require deeper levels of thinking that go beyond merely summarizing surface-level facts (see the discussion of the Analytic Spectrum in Chapter 4 that defines four levels of thinking).[6] The question should be[7]

1. *Relevant.* The question should focus on that aspect of an emerging issue, problem, or challenge that is of greatest interest to the client. Has recent reporting signaled the possibility of a new challenge or opportunity emerging? For example, are recent technological developments likely to drastically alter the market for your product? Does social media contain indications of looming political instability and social unrest that could undercut (or support) the client's key policy objectives?

2. *Timely.* Is there an action-forcing event that warrants alerting the client to this issue at this time? For example, does the client need to know something before meeting with someone in the coming days? Or before attending a meeting to set policy on this issue? Have we gained critical new insights about the negotiating position of an adversary or a competitor? Will the new development require that action be taken to preempt an undesirable condition before it is too late? Is there a critical time frame outside of which the issue loses relevance?

3. *Precisely worded.* Is the issue framed precisely, in context, and with syntax the client will understand? Is the question stated clearly with sufficient focus to enable the client to take action?

4. *Actionable.* What are the implications of this issue for the client? What is the "So What"? Will this issue require action by the client? Are there obvious implications if the client acts or does not act? Will the client or his or her organization be harmed? Does attention need to be focused on what actions

should be taken to prevent or mitigate risk? Does the client have the power to influence the outcome significantly? Is the response posed in such a way that it offers several possible courses of action and identifies opportunities but does not prescribe policy or suggest which option is preferable?

5. *Answerable in more than one way*. Is the question posed in such a way that the answer has more than one credible alternative or course of action? Can the question be answered by a range of possible hypotheses and not simply by a yes-or-no response? Is the question devoid of any hidden assumptions that might lead the client to take an ill-advised action not supported by the facts? Are there key uncertainties that could greatly affect the outcome?

One exception to the "actionable" rule is when a warning message is delivered of a potential problem that does not require immediate action but should be brought to the attention of a decision maker in case future events would require action. Similarly, an exception to the "answerable in more than one way" rule occurs when there is only one right answer. For example, if conducting a Foresight analysis of Cuba and the question is whether demographics are a key driver that will help determine how a future Cuba will evolve, the only answer is yes—it is an aging society disinclined to demand dramatic political change. Or are the balloons the Chinese sent over US territory in 2023 equipped to intercept encrypted military communications?

Refining the Question

Helping clients frame their question to inform their decision making is a key analytic task.[8] If the analyst does not understand exactly what information is being sought by the client and interprets the question too broadly, then substantial resources will be wasted and the client will be disappointed with the response. The "raw" question that might first come to mind needs to be "refined" by asking a series of questions (see Table 2.1 for a simple example relating to anticipating the impact that cyber actors might have on critical infrastructure).

Table 2.1 ▪ The Intelligence Question (IQ) Questionnaire

Client	Infrastructure Security
New Development	New cyber threat actors
Raw Question	What are they up to?
Key Issue/Actors	What are their capabilities?
National Interest	Are they targeting national critical infrastructure?
Specific Customer Concern	Can they disrupt the US communications sector?

Client	Infrastructure Security
Timeframe	How long will it take them to develop organizational infrastructure?
Refined Question	How will the emergence of the new cyber actor impact the level of preparedness among US wireless systems in the next 6–12 months?

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Analysts should consider the following questions when framing a question prior to writing their paper:

- Is it clear what would constitute an answer to the question?
- Is it obvious what information is needed to answer the question? If not, try to clarify exactly what information or analytic judgment the client seeks.
- Is the client really interested in something else but has cast the question too broadly or narrowly, assuming the analyst knows what is being sought?
- Are there any hidden assumptions underlying the question?
- Does the client's decision depend on whether the answer meets a threshold or a set of thresholds rather than a precise answer? If so, frame your response appropriately.

For open-ended questions, some of the best techniques to use in preparing a response are Multiple Hypothesis Generation, Quadrant Crunching™, What If? Analysis, and Foresight analysis. For yes-or-no questions, techniques to consider include the Key Assumptions Check, Structured Analogies, and Analysis of Competing Hypotheses.

The Five Ws and an H

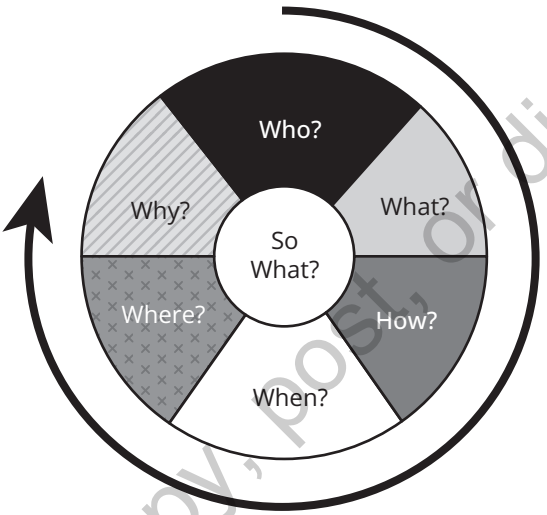
A highly effective strategy for identifying the key intelligence or policy question is to ask the six questions often used by journalists: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? Practical experience in using this strategy has shown that a better order for asking these questions is Who? What? How? When? Where? And Why? We recommend changing the order for two reasons: (1) The new order best follows the structure of a standard English sentence, and (2) the "what" and the "how" often overlap or are used to describe similar aspects of the issue.

Techniques that use the so-called Five-Ws-and-an-H strategy include Circleboarding™, Starbursting, and Mind Mapping.[9] Each technique enables you

to explore all aspects of a problem or an issue. Jot down two or three responses to each of the questions and then go back and assess which set of responses is most deserving of attention. Prioritize the six sets of responses and reframe the original question to address the set of responses that was given the highest priority.

The Circleboarding™ technique adds a seventh question: "So What?" (see Figure 2.1). The inclusion of this question stimulates discussion beyond just consolidating what is known by spurring the analyst to identify weak points in the group's knowledge and encouraging discussion of what assumptions are being made.

Figure 2.1 ▪ The Circleboarding™ Technique



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These processes are particularly helpful when the question asked by your client appears too broad or too encompassing. In conducting this simple exercise, note what types of information are available to answer each question. Also consider whether any major information gaps exist that would require more research or the tasking of others to collect more information.

The Question Method

The Question Method (see Box 2.1) is another simple technique analysts can use to organize a long-term research project or a short-fused memo.[10] It helps analysts structure a paper by focusing first on the question of greatest interest to the client or customer set and then on subsequent questions in descending order of priority.

One of the greatest strengths of the Question Method is that it eliminates inclusion of any information that is not deemed to be of direct interest to the client. By organizing the paper around a small number of key questions, the time needed to edit and review the paper is significantly reduced. We will build on the Question Method as a component of the AIMS (**A**udience, **I**ssue or intelligence question, **M**essage, and **S**toryline) approach to conceptualizing a product discussed in Chapter 4.

Box 2.1 Using Key Questions to Organize Your Product

1. Identify the key issue or problem your principal client or client set is currently wrestling with or likely to confront in the near future.
2. Remember that clients at different levels are likely to be dealing with different types of decisions on the issue.
3. Brainstorm a list of focused key questions relating to that topic that the client is likely to ask or that the client anticipates will be asked of her or him.
4. Answering a focused question that clients are currently asking increases the chances your product will be useful. It will have immediate appeal.
5. Answering a set of focused questions is easier than generating an overall assessment on a topic from scratch.
6. Add any questions to the list that the client may not be asking but probably should be.
7. Draw on your expertise and analytic tools to add any questions that the client—because of more limited time and knowledge of the topic—has not thought about yet.
8. Select the questions on the list that you can answer or to which you can contribute a useful perspective.
9. If you cannot answer an essential question, consider starting work to get the answer.
10. If you have received a direct question from a client, be sure to include this question near the top of your list.
11. Prioritize and organize the list of questions to guide your collection, collaboration, and research—and the outline of the finished product.
12. Organize (order) the questions into a storyline that will most effectively present the information and analysis, starting with the issues of greatest concern or interest to the client.
13. Your organized set of questions now becomes the outline to begin researching and drafting the finished product.
14. Remember that the questions may change as your research and drafting progress.

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Key Takeaways

- A well-crafted analytic product contains a single, primary message that answers a key intelligence or policy question.
- Analysts can help clients by using questions as a means of engagement to determine if they have correctly determined their needs. A Red Hat Analysis is one technique that enables analysts to put themselves "in the client's shoes."
- Analysts can best prepare for an effective Red Hat Analysis by asking "essential" and "building-block" questions to frame the analytic need; scanning the environment to understand what others think about the issue; identifying trends from available data; engaging in Outside-In Thinking; considering the "white space" of what is missing, poorly articulated, or not yet defined; and brainstorming key questions with colleagues.
- A good intelligence or policy question is relevant, timely, precisely worded, actionable, and answerable in more than one way.
- The journalists' list of Who? What? How? When? Where? Why? and our addition of the question "So What?" provides an efficient schema for exploring the key intelligence or policy questions on which to focus an analytic product.
- The Question Method is a fast and effective technique for organizing a paper that addresses a client's key concerns in priority order.

Considering the Case Study

Review Case Study II, "Blackout on the Eastern Seaboard!"

- What are the key questions a senior policymaker is likely to ask of energy infrastructure and national security officials when fashioning his or her initial public response to the blackout? Formulate "essential" and "building block" questions and ensure that the responses satisfy the five characteristics of a good question.
- What are the key questions those responsible for restoring power are likely to ask about the event? Formulate "essential" and "building block" questions and ensure that the responses satisfy the five characteristics of a good question.
- How would you use the Five-Ws-and-an-H strategy to identify the key question for a senior decision maker?
- How would you organize a paper on the implications of the blackout using the Question Method?