

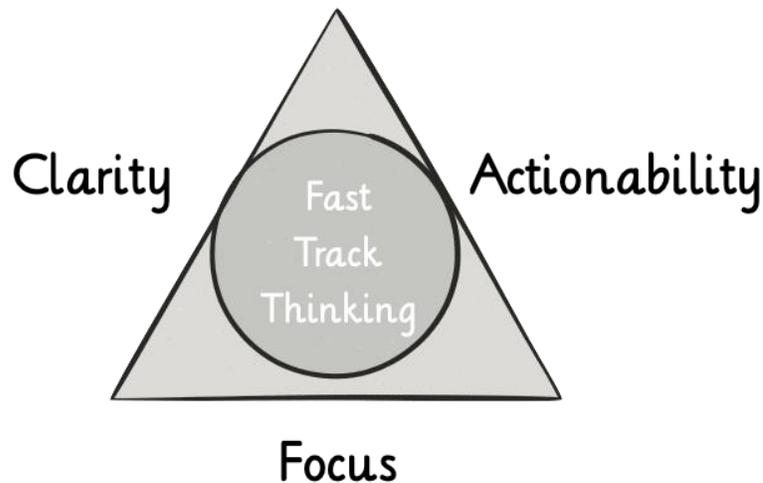
Thinking Whole: A Fast Track Tool

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In the digital lexicon the most important recurring reference items are known as the “FAQ’s” – the frequently asked questions – which, by the nature of the frequency with which they are asked, are presumed to be the guiding principles to which the questioners should defer.

Fast Track Thinking

When engaged in the process of “Thinking Whole” – and more specifically in Fast Track Thinking (FTT) we are more concerned with the “FAC’s”– Focus, Actionability, and Clarity. Everything we are trying to provide is meant to deliver on these three dimensions of meaningful thinking. At the same time, they should serve as a continual benchmark for both the progress and the validity of the thinking FTT produces.



Focus

Polynesian totem carvers work with the idea that you create something beautiful by removing everything that does not belong and leaving only the essential truth of what is in the wood with which you work. The best thinking works along a similar track. Once you have a tool to help you remove what is inessential, your thinking gets ever closer to what some call “laser sharp” focus. Intelligently narrowing the scope of what concerns you makes it increasingly possible to embrace it, process it, and make sense of it.

Actionability

Unless you are lucky enough to earn an adequate living as a professional philosopher, most thinking tends to fall squarely into the “what can I/what must I do with this insight, learning, or decision category. The real value for most people is not so much in the thinking going on in your skull as it is in the applicability of the thinking to what changes “out there” in the world in which you actually live.

Clarity

Clarity is the moment when thinking crystallizes into a wholly new understanding. It doesn't have to be an earth shattering “aha” moment. It is, equally as much, that special moment when some tumblers fall for not their correct spaces and things just make total sense.

These three thoughts need to be sort of the “guide rails” that keep Fast Track Thinking on course and headed towards a productive destination. They deserve frequent attention as checks and guides on the road to that progress. Without focus there is no progress. Without actionability there is no value. Without clarity there is no change.

FTT: A snapshot

Fast Track Thinking is about staring at a LOT of information with the intention of reducing that information to a single, overriding understanding that lets you make sense of it all and actually be able to do something with it. At first blush that seems like a tall order—but the truth is there is always a way to tackle life's challenges no matter how big, how daunting, and how overwhelming. All you need is a place to start.

It is often difficult to know where to start when we're facing what at first looks to be a daunting challenge. Certainly, making sense of Hyper Information falls squarely in that category of challenges. The simple truth is that there really is a place to start tackling even the most complex challenges. When it comes to information, that place is a framework – one that serves to get the thinking started.

The Rule of Three

The Fast Track Thinking app for your brain is built around this notion that three ideas are the core of most, if not all, understanding. This part of the process is essentially intuitive – what some of the experts call fast-track or thin-slicing thinking – so I feel safe and comfortable that three ideas are a great way to start any thinking process.

If you start with the knowledge that out of all the things you might know about any issue all you need concern yourself with are three, then simply committing to that intuitively brilliant truth gets things going. Immediately, the task becomes less daunting and more manageable. Your thinking engine rapidly builds up ahead of steam, you slip the breaks and move forward as you go from “there's an awful lot of stuff here” and “this is really hard” to “OK, this is something I can get my arms around” and “I think so, therefore I can” – to borrow from the Little Engine that Could. You engage your brain in filling in the blanks and before you know it, you come up with the three things that just “feel” right to the fast-thinking side of your brain and fit “right” into the three blank spaces that fostered the thinking. You write these ideas down as they come to you. Welcome to the Rule of Three!

Now that you've got a full head of steam and you feel you are running on the right track, a couple of logical questions begin to gnaw on your brain. Where did this thinking come from? Where is this thinking taking me? The truth is that you passed multiple points in getting here and a destination, by definition, is a singularity – the goal of this thinking journey.

Here's where the first part – how you got here – is tackled with your expanding mind. You think to yourself - these three ideas came from somewhere and I ought to know where that is for several very good reasons. For myself – it would make me feel more comfortable to know that I didn't just pull these ideas out of the air. For other people – I should be able to explain how I got to this thinking and maybe defend the ideas better if I had to.

The Rule of Seven

Most importantly, as I think about from whence these ideas came, I might be able to sharpen, clarify, and even revise the three thoughts with which I started. But how do I do this without opening up a can of worms? How do I go through all the stuff that got me here as efficiently and as rapidly?

This is where the Rule of Seven comes in spectacularly. Based on the available empirical knowledge, the opinions of scientists, educators, and psychologists – not to mention my own body of work – you need to do the same for this part of your thinking that you did for the three ideas. If you don't need any more than three ideas to make sense of something, how many supporting points do you need?

If it is true that three ideas are what you need - neither more nor less than three ideas to make information understandable and useful—then (based on everything we talked about earlier) the number of support points needs to be seven. Nobody, including you yourself, are likely to be able to embrace, process, and remember more than seven supporting points for any issue.

At the same time, if you can't come up with seven supporting points then either the issue is far too simple for this process so you don't need it..... or you just aren't taking this seriously enough. Either way, it's going to be very difficult to defend any ideas unless you have “enough” to back up your thinking. Seven supporting points are enough, fewer are too few. Welcome to the Rule of Seven. Write them down.

These points do NOT have to be in any particular order. You don't need to sweat out prioritizing them. It is enough that they exist as “explanation” of why your three ideas make sense.

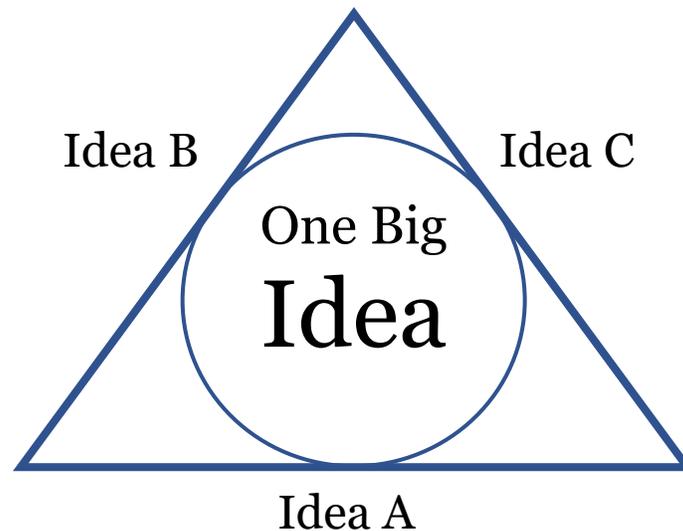
The Rule of One

That leaves us with one more point on our thinking journey – the destination, the point of the trip in the first place. What does this all come down to? Having a better understanding of where you've been and how you got in motion begs the question – Where to? What is the final destination? The remaining number that makes sense for this, you guessed it, The Number One.

Actually, at this point, it shouldn't be too hard to coalesce your thinking and grind it down to a singular fine point. After all, you've taken a mass of Hyper Information and reduced it to 7 supporting points. In looking at those points you were able to deduce, intuit, and extract 3

ideas... or the other way around. In either case the three ideas come from the supporting points (Making the connection is deliberative, critical thinking work).

Go back to your three ideas. Try to visualize them in a different relationship – not as a list but as three sides of a triangle:



As you might remember, three is the minimum number of sides that can define a space. In this case, each side of the triangle represents an aspect of the ONE BIG IDEA that reduces the thinking you've been doing to its core. When it comes to the three ideas around the sides of the triangle, each idea has to be different from the other two and each idea encapsulates a single aspect of the thinking you've done before.

Welcome to Fast Track Thinking 101! In its simplest form, FFT 101 says that any issue can be reduced to neither more, nor less, than 7 supporting points. Those supporting points serve as the fuel for generating three ideas that simultaneously combine and separate the supporting points and help you see three aspects of the issue with which you're trying to deal. Once you perceive the relationship of those the three ideas, you will find the BIG IDEA at their center. That's the briefest overview... but there's more to talk about.

Fast Track Thinking – Upside down, Inside Out, Downside Up

What's really wonderful about the Fast Track Thinking app is that it serves to align a relationship between three kinds of information. In the case of Fast Track Thinking, that relationship is not linear and sequential – where one flows from the other – but dynamic, where any one can lead to the other two.

You can start the Fast Track Thinking process at any point – at any of the three levels.

Suppose you have already intuited a Big Idea... because that's just the way you are gifted to think (in which case you clearly are a fast thinker and fundamentally creative? If that's enough for you then all is good.

On the other hand, if you are driven to understand the WHY behind such serendipitous cogitation so that you can be sure it keeps happening again and again (as was the case in my experience) then it can't hurt to build the complete picture, regardless of whether you start at the top and work your way down, start at the bottom and work your way up, or start in the middle and work up and down from there.

The point is that the framework helps you combine intuition and logic into the most productive amalgam of thinking possible. As you practice and perfect your working with this "app" you will internalize the dynamic – and that is what Fast Track Thinking is all about.

Questions Matter More Than Answers

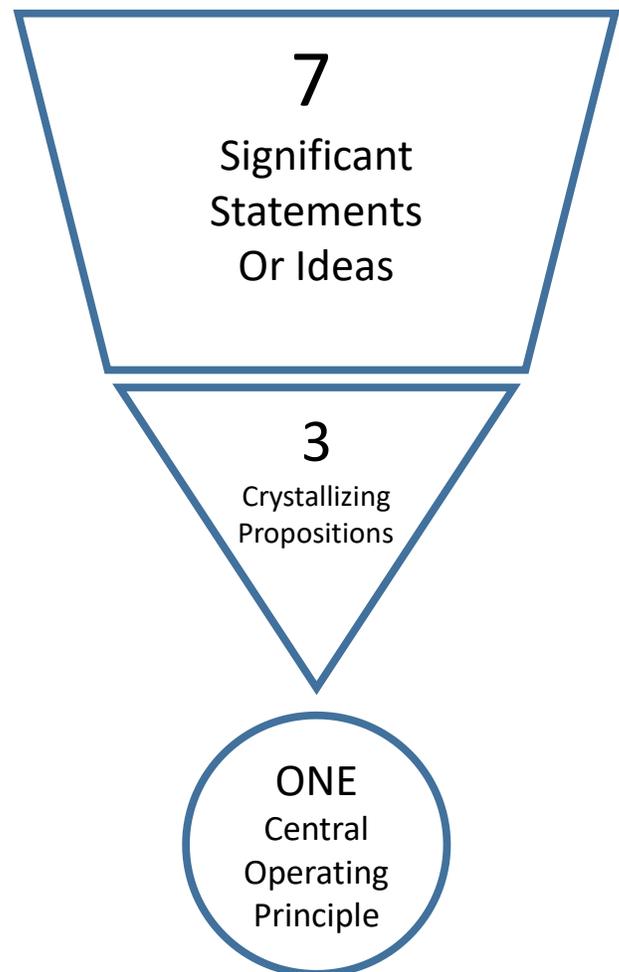
The fundamental premise behind Fast Track Thinking is discovering and implementing the best framework that will help shape thinking more rapidly and more effectively. In a sense, that framework is a kind of "fill in these blanks" exercise.

The methodology knows what to ask but can't know what your answers should be. Fast Track Thinking poses the questions but only you can provide the best answers for you.

Knowing what questions need to be asked gets the thinking started. The Fast Track Thinking framework focuses the brain on the specific type and number of questions and, more importantly, on the best path to progress. Remember that FTT got its start when I realized that I might not have the answers... nor even the questions... in any meeting, I did at least know there needed to be three propositions that framed the issue to be determined and that the group needed neither more nor fewer than seven significant facts to get the job done.

Which gets to the heart of the best type of thinking. The truth is that answers are not nearly as important as questions. After all is said and done, answers can't even exist until the questions have been asked. Getting the right answer totally depends on asking the right question. A framework IS a question; actually a whole stream of directed questions.

At its heart, Fast Track Thinking is built around the understanding that what focuses the human brain for optimum performance is knowing what questions to ask is the best kick start towards getting the answers. That, and knowing that the key to unlocking understanding is marked by the process of distillation and crystallization.



Starting with the big list and discerning the “short list” is “Actionable Insighting” – figuring out what matters most about whatever is being thought about.

Framing

Seven Significant Statements are the foundation for the thinking to be done. Three Triangulating Propositions define the space that leads to an appreciation of the Central Operating Premise of the specific situation. The framework is the roadmap for cracking the code of the issue and getting to the heart of the matter. Once you get to Central Operating Premise it is completely clear that you understand the matter well enough to be brief ... very brief.

The words “seven significant statements” are carefully chosen because at this level you are operating in fast thinking mode. The quickest way to get through a lot of data and information is to create a framework that invites the intuitive thinker in you to take the lead while, at the same time, giving the deliberative thinker in you a degree of control over at least the amount and the purpose of the insights your intuitive thinker needs to “intuit.” This approach combines elements of the best of each thinking/decisional modalities on which you function.

Significance

The word “significant” has a special importance in the Fast Track Thinking space. Clearly, some part of your brain taps into everything you have ever learned, everything you are, and every process which you have ever used to subconsciously sort through information to “assess” (although clearly not in a logical and deliberative sense) what “matters” and what does not matter and what “has significance” and what does not. I can’t tell you how often, in the course of running a group Fast Track Thinking exercise, I have found myself saying “this feels important enough to put on the list of seven. I don’t know why or how it’s important. I just know it is...”

Time after time, those statements that made the list of seven ended up being meaningful. They may not have ultimately ended up on the final list, but their continuing presence in the thinking process ultimately helped shape and clarify other ideas.

The other aspect of “significant” implies a weighting or a value that goes with the idea of neither more nor fewer than seven. If you can’t come up with seven significant statements, go back to your source material and figure out what you missed on the first pass. Having less than seven supporting points just feels like “light thinking” or skimming and might put you at risk of having missed something important.

If, on the other hand, you get to seven quickly and then start feeling that other things also belong on the list... well, this is exactly why The Rule of Seven exists. Remember that no one will be able to embrace more than seven supporting statements. If you feel that more points “need” to be included, that’s when the real heavy thinking begins.

If you want your eighth point to go up on the list of seven, something has got to give.

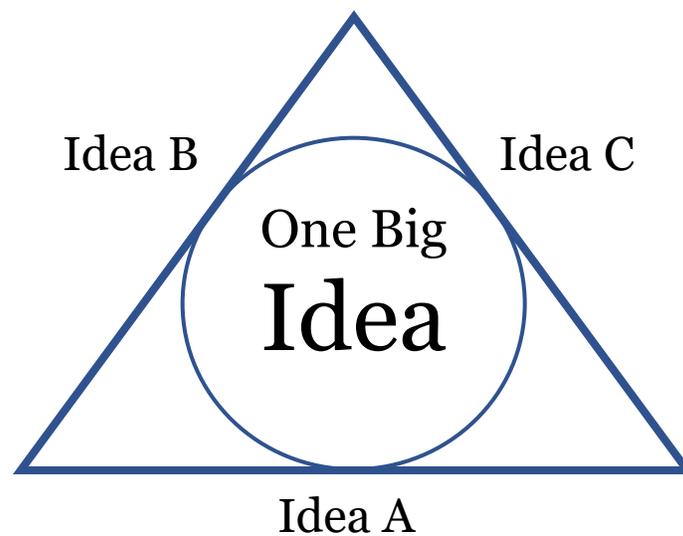
- a) Figure out which of the seven items already on the list can be dropped to make room for your new idea.
- b) See whether the new idea is actually a subset of one on the list.

- c) See whether the new idea is actually a superset that “umbrellas over” one (or more) of the ideas already on your list.
- d) See whether the new idea helps to precipitate the combination of one or more of the existing listed items.
- e) See whether the new idea actually completes one of the ideas on your list.

This is where you do your “heavy lifting” thinking but, because you have the requirement and at the same time the limit of seven significant supporting statements, the likelihood (and the experience) is that you will make exactly that happen; a clear example of substance flowing from the right form.

From Facts to Insights

Once you settle on your seven statements, you’re ready to narrow the funnel from facts to insights; from seven to three (again neither more than nor fewer than three because it’s time to create a space for the Big Idea at the end of the thinking rainbow).



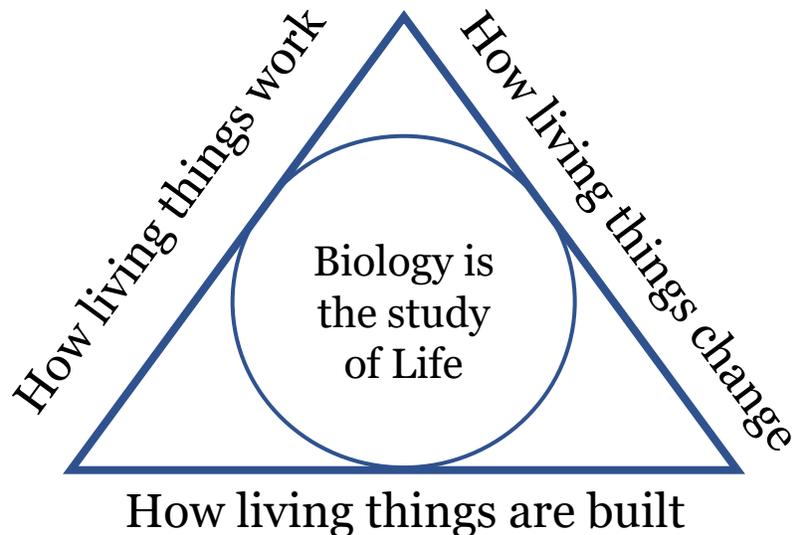
In a perfect world, the three sides of the triangle should be expressed in the form of propositions that shape the One Big Idea. Here’s an example:

My daughter, who teaches high school biology, once asked me to come into her classroom at midterm and apply Fast Track Thinking to helping her students understand what Biology is and what they had learned in the first part of their term so that they could get more out of the remaining half of that term. This is where the idea of “metacognition” (knowing how you know what you know) comes into play.

What follows is what we came up with, working with 45 Freshman brains in three classes.

The simple question posed was “what is Biology?” After working through the significant statements, we honed in on what would ultimately make up the three propositions that serve to answer that question:

- 1) How living things work – how they do what they do
- 2) How living things change – what happens to them over time
- 3) How living things are built – literally how they are constructed



The most fascinating thing about the exercise, beyond the fact that the students realized just how much they had learned and what that “much” was, was the fact that they ended up defining biology in terms of the literal definition of the roots from which “biology” derives. Biology is made up of two Greek words - "bioes" and "logoes". Bioes means "life" and "logoes" means "to discuss" so literally translated the combination means a discussion (aka study) of life. Not bad for a bunch of early teens!

Another way, a more actionable and practical way, of defining the One Big Idea is to think of it as the Central Operating Principle. I have found that thinking of this as an operating principle tends to turn the end product of thinking of decisioning into something more meaningful. This is so mainly because a central operating principle tends to communicate that this is something that can guide what you do rather than simply something that represents the boiled down essence of a thought process.

Fast Track Thinking & Thinking Out Loud

In summary, Fast Track Thinking is the process by means of which a person (you or also someone to whom you can teach it) can make sense of large amounts of information by means of a different kind of reductive process; one that combines fast thinking and slow thinking and adds a proven focusing subroutine for your brain.

That “app” makes it possible to shape thinking in a 3-step procedure that begins with a maximum and a minimum of seven statements that turn into three propositions that describe a central operating premise works on the intellectual level. Far more importantly, the visual that helps and guides Fast Track Thinking has a higher value impact. Doing it in writing, or drawing, or whatever external form you might choose to use takes the thinking out of your brain and puts it out where you can see it.

The best thinking happens with formulas at blackboards where two things can happen – a) the thinking can be visually perceived; something that has proven its value over and over again in intellectual human history and 2) puts it in a readily-editable format. As you take in the visual representation of what you are thinking it becomes increasingly easier to perceive patterns. Perceiving the patterns makes it that much easier to edit, revise, and realign the relationship of information “chunks” until they all align neatly towards a solution.

If I tell you in so many words that stars in the sky seem to line up in meaningful patterns, by itself that doesn’t mean very much. If, on the other hand, I take your hand and guide it and your eye along the shape of a dipper, or a man on a horse, or a woman in the night sky something wonderfully magic happens. Not only do you perceive those patterns but also, from that day forward, you will never be able NOT to see the patterns. That’s the meaning of the scene from the motion picture “*A Beautiful Mind*” when Russell Crowe shares his ability to perceive patterns with his co-star Jennifer Connelly. Not only does he show her the constellations, he also imprints on her mind the patterns that will help her see those and more every time she looks skyward in the future. Fast Track Thinking is constructed with the same result in mind.

Something magical happens when you think around a structure and out loud and get to see your thinking well enough to understand it.

Conclusions

Making sense of a lot of information by structuring it towards a decision is “Actionable Insighting.” Insights are what transforms data, information, and “thinking” into something with which you can work and something on which you can act – that action being anything from the act of understanding something clearly to coming to a decision to being ready to literally take create an action plan. Insights are also keys to cracking the code of that with which you are working. Some people call these the “Aha’s.” When it comes to dealing with lots of information, baby steps are the perfect roadmap to an AHA. You only need to wrap your brain around as much as you can manage at any one stage. It helps if you know what you’re looking for. The 7-3-1 Fast Track Thinking format is based on the simple concept of “filling in the blanks.”