Crafting Your Elevator Pitch

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What is an elevator pitch?

Generally speaking, an elevator pitch explains **who you are and what you do**.

BUT the pitch is as much about your audience as it is about you. Like any piece of communication, it has some purpose. (You don't just walk up to random people on the street and tell them about yourself, do you?) You want your audience to think, feel, or do something specific, depending on who they are and their relationship to you. So a pitch aimed at a fellow researcher would be completely different from a pitch aimed at a policy-maker, even if you're covering some of the same information.

Think of your pitch as a conversation starter, NOT a speech. There are very few situations where it's appropriate to talk for more than a minute without interruption. Your goal is to get your listener interested enough to ask you a follow up question.

Figure 1: Don't do this.

Great, where do I start?

First we'll brainstorm:

1. What do you do and why?
2. Who is your audience and why are you talking to them?
3. What does your audience care about?

Then we'll start crafting:

4. Find the hook.
5. Explain one thing.
6. Have a conversation.

Finally, your homework:

7. PRACTICE.

What do you do and why?

What do you do?

DON’T try to draft a coherent explanation here. Just brainstorm a list of topics, questions, methods, results, etc.

Why do you do what you do? Why is it interesting? Why is it valuable? Why did you choose this line of work rather than something else?

Again, DON’T try to draft an argument or explanation here—just brainstorm a list.

WHO is your audience and WHY are you talking to them?

Who	*Why*
At a **conference** or workshop or when they visit your department for a colloquium, you encounter a: ☐ Faculty or student researcher in your subfield ☐ Faculty or student researcher in a different subfield or field	☐ You want them to remember you and your work. ☐ You want their feedback on a project. ☐ You want to start a collaboration with them. ☐ They ask for the 30-second version of your poster. ☐ You want them to meet with you about a postdoc. ☐ You have applied for a job in their department and want them to be impressed with you.
You're on an academic **job visit** and have one-on-one meetings scheduled with: ☐ Faculty in your subfield ☐ Faculty in a different subfield ☐ Students from various subfields ☐ Chair of the department ☐ Dean of the college	☐ You want them to think you have interesting ideas and will contribute to the intellectual life of the department. ☐ You want them to think you'll be a good future collaborator. ☐ You want them to think that your research is in hot demand, and you'll have lots of publications and grants. ☐ You want them to understand how your work complements that of other faculty in the department, and how it will have a broad impact on the field.
Sometimes a non-scientist might ask what you do: ☐ Science journalist ☐ Participant (or parent of a participant) in your experiment ☐ High school student ☐ Potential employer ☐ Policy-maker ☐ Family member or friend ☐ Attractive stranger on OkCupid	☐ You want them to learn something new about science. ☐ You want them to feel good about participating in your experiment. ☐ You want them to consider going to college or pursuing a career in science. ☐ You're in an interview and want them to hire you. ☐ You want them to fund your research. ☐ You want them to change a policy. ☐ You want them to feel good about paying for college. ☐ You want a second date.

What does your audience care about?

What are their top priorities (regardless of whether they're relevant to your work)?

What do you *not know* about what's important to your audience? Is it possible to find any of it out before you talk to them?

What's important to your audience that could possibly be relevant to your work? What do they think is interesting? What do they value?

What interests or values do you share? What do you agree on?

Some examples:
Mental health challenges are an important societal problem.
Behaviorist approaches to human language are misguided.
Optogenetics is super cool.

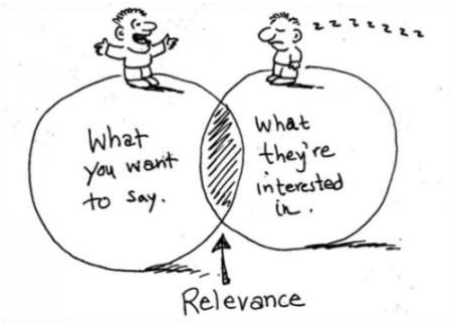

Figure 2: Be relevant!

Find the hook.

The hook justifies your audience's continued attention. Some possible strategies:

Establish a shared interest or value.

You can do this by stating something that you know they find interesting or important, or by asking them what they think is interesting or important. If your audience is another researcher with similar background knowledge, the shared interest could be fairly esoteric. If your audience isn't a scientist at all, the shared interest or value will probably need to be something from the "real world".

Do you know anyone who's been affected by [health or societal problem]?
Have you ever noticed [everyday relatable fact about human life]?
Have you heard about optogenetics? Cool, right?

Draw them into your personal story.

If your audience doesn't have any particular reason to care about what you're doing, maybe you can get them interested in you.

My younger brother has autism, and that got me interested in studying [something relevant to autism].
I used to work as an occupational therapist with veterans who had lost an arm or a leg. I noticed XXX, and that's why I'm studying YYY.

Wow them with a surprising fact.

But not just any old fact—it has to be something they can relate to, or wildly fascinating on its own.

A 13-year-old knows almost 40,000 words on average, which is already pretty impressive. But a 22-year-old college graduate knows around 70,000 words. That's almost 10 new words a day!

What's your hook?

Explain one thing.

Now that your audience is hooked, this is NOT your chance to explain your whole dissertation. **You get to explain ONE THING, maybe two, before you leave an opening for your listener to respond.** If you've done well and they're still interested, they'll ask a follow-up question. If they change the subject, no amount of additional explaining would have sunk in anyway. Some guidelines:

Start with the bottom line. Don't waste your time on background information.

NO JARGON. Jargon makes your listener work harder to understand you. It will not make them think you're smart.

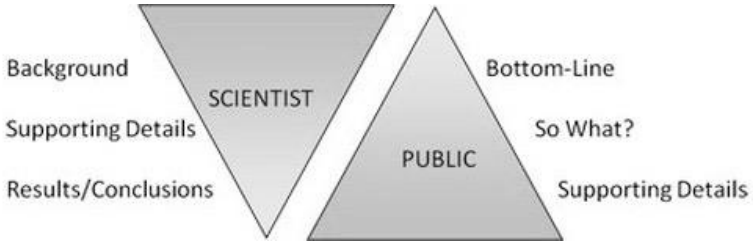

Figure 3: DON'T explain like a scientist.

Tell a story. If you can, explain what you're doing with a specific example instead of generalities. A narrative is a lot easier to follow than a logical argument.

Choose a tractable problem. Big picture research questions that will take 50 more years to answer are too abstract for an elevator pitch. Talk about something you can make progress on soon.

What's your one thing?

What do you want them to ask you next? Each point you make should lead to a follow-up question from your listener. If you can't think of a question, they can't either—you said too much or not enough.

How do you go about doing that? How is your approach different from how people did it before?
If that works, what do you plan to do next?
How does that actually help us figure out [big important problem you hooked them with]?

Have a conversation.

A pitch outline with flexible modules is much better than a memorized speech.

HOOK	

YOUR TOP THING	

LISTENER QUESTION:	LISTENER QUESTION:
RESPONSE:	RESPONSE:

LISTENER QUESTION:	LISTENER QUESTION:
RESPONSE:	RESPONSE:

Have another conversation!

HOOK	

YOUR TOP THING	

LISTENER QUESTION:	**LISTENER QUESTION:**
RESPONSE:	**RESPONSE:**

LISTENER QUESTION:	**LISTENER QUESTION:**
RESPONSE:	**RESPONSE:**