

FROM THE SCIENCE STUDENT COUNCIL

The elevator pitch

How to craft a successful five-minute elevator pitch and why having one is important.

By [Allison Gaffey](#)

You have about five minutes to create the right first impression. This is the window of opportunity you have been waiting for. Ready? Set? Go! For any of you unfamiliar with the term, an elevator pitch (or research spiel) is a concise, rehearsed statement of who you are, and your research interests and experience, that is intended to be shared informally and orally in various professional contexts. Specific scenarios that may require an elevator-style pitch include introductions around a table at the beginning of a meeting, a brief encounter with a scholar in your field at a conference, a conversation at a reception for a speaker or even an actual elevator ride with a search committee member. Clearly, the elevator pitch can be used in all kinds of situations to make the right impression. A well-crafted elevator pitch may be especially useful for graduate students and post-docs who are seeking to establish themselves in their area of expertise. Ultimately, mastering this type of communication can lead to collaborations and greater visibility in your field and subfield. The right elevator pitch can be powerful enough to open the right doors.

The general goal of an elevator pitch is to create a memorable and positive impression. First, you would like to be remembered as the person who researches “blank.” Second, you hope to open the door to further conversation. You want to give people something they can respond to. Give them a hook to capture their attention and encourage questions about your research. Because your goal is to create a memorable impression on the individual you are pitching to, the elevator pitch is really all about that quality human interaction. You shouldn’t learn your pitch well enough that you turn into an elevator pitch robot. You should, however, make sure you are connecting with the person you are talking with and can appropriately respond to their reactions. Disseminating research ideas is a key aspect of being a scientist. However, this type of communication can prove particularly difficult when you are crunched for time.

Therefore, your elevator pitch should answer a number of questions clearly and concisely. These questions include:

- What is the **topic** of your research?
- What is the **problem, issue or question** that you are asking and addressing in your research? We know that academia is about delving deeper into the topic so what is the core question you want to answer? This can be a compelling introduction to your research.
- **How** are you uniquely addressing this problem, issue or question? What do you do to tackle this problem? Answering this question gives people a sense of how you actually do something — which is important to give a potential collaborator an idea of how you are actually engaging in the world.
- Why is that problem interesting and important? In other words, so what? How does your work connect with a **broader conversation** about this topic/problem in your discipline and related fields, and what does it add to that conversation?
- Finally, what is the **goal or aim** of the conversation? When you consider how the conversation will help you reach your goal, you can cater your speech to reflect that goal.

As a rule, a simple elevator pitch is always better because it will be suitable to a greater variety of audiences and situations. If necessary, draw up a few different versions of pitches that answer these questions before settling on your final points. You may also want different versions of the pitch to fit different time allotments. While crafting your pitch you should also pay close attention to your language. Wording should be conversational, but incorporate both key nouns and action verbs. Key nouns will offer topical touchstones that are accessible to a wide range of educated people. However, avoid jargon if possible, or delivering specialized terms. Specialized terms may be confusing and undermine the goal of a simple pitch. Use action verbs to express relationships among the key nouns. For example, describe the movement of your work and the activity or action of your involvement. This type of description is more interesting and engaging to an audience.

Once you have sketched out your concise answers (remember, it’s only supposed to be five minutes) to each of those questions it’s time to practice, practice, practice your delivery. You may first notice that although it is beneficial to outline your pitch on paper, the pitch may need to be adjusted to how you actually speak. It may be easier to rehearse your pitch from bullet points rather than trying to memorize your spiel word for word. The bullet point method

may also help make your pitch delivery much more natural. Basically your elevator pitch should sound unrehearsed and polished.

After some initial practice by yourself in a mirror, find an audience, ideally individuals who are both familiar and unfamiliar with your research, to hear your pitch. Also, remember to pay attention to eye contact, as it's important to read your listener and adjust accordingly. Finally, maintaining an appropriate level of confidence and enthusiasm will ensure that your elevator pitch is well delivered. In addition to broader practice feedback, ask your listener(s) to repeat your pitch back to you. If they cannot reiterate your main points you may need to revise or simplify the content. When practicing your speech consider your content: Did you get all your key points across? Were you able to remain "in the moment"? Afterward, did listeners ask what you expected them to ask? You may also need to adjust your elevator pitch depending on the demands of your audience or time — for example, if you have a 30 second window rather than five minutes. So remember, your elevator speech should be concise, simple, unrehearsed and delivered with confidence. In the end, you will know the pitch is successful if your audience wants to hear more.



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