WHY DO I NEED AN ELEVATOR PITCH?

You want your work to make a difference.

• Whether you’re seeking grant funding, hoping to promote a paper or just want your grandma to understand what you do, you need to talk to people outside your area of expertise about your research.

• A good pitch will help you engage your audience and inspire action.

• Communications work elevates your reputation and boosts your research impact.
Define your audience.

- You will want to refine your pitch based on who’s listening. Other researchers? A potential donor or industry partner? Children?
- Think carefully about jargon: Do you need it? If so, can you define your terms clearly?
- Not sure about someone’s level of expertise or interest? Ask!
GETTING STARTED

Think about context.

• An elevator pitch might normally be a bit of spoken language. Are you delivering it at an academic conference? In a bar? Over Zoom?

• You can also find yourself delivering a pitch via email or in a single PowerPoint slide.

• Use that context to guide you as you decide how long and complex the pitch should be. Use all the tools at your disposal, including visuals if you have the chance!
When you have one key idea you want to convey

- Two components: your point of view and what’s at stake
- Express the idea in a complete sentence, ideally with a subject (to highlight your role or your audience’s role) and a verb (to convey action and elicit emotion).
- Example, drawn from Binghamton research by Zili Yang: “Climate change is our most complicated global pollution challenge, and cooperation is the key to solving it.”

*Read more about this approach in Nancy Duarte’s work.*
STYLE #2: A CENTRAL QUESTION

Early on, you may not have all the answers.

- This works well at the outset of a big project.
- Define your work in terms of what you want to know vs. what’s already understood.
- Example, drawn from research conducted at Binghamton by Jessica Hua: Why are some communities more susceptible to disease than others?
- In your elevator pitch, you can ask the question and then suggest some possible answers or the techniques you plan to employ in search of the answers.
STYLE #3: TELL ME A STORY

Use the power of narrative.

• Here there are three elements: Surprise, conflict and vulnerability.

• Establish the protagonist. Show the protagonist making a hard choice or encountering some difficulty. Help your audience empathize with the protagonist. Wrap up with an “aha” moment.

• Example: Let’s see if we can tell the story of the Three Little Pigs together.

*Read more about this approach in the book Story or Die.*
Refine your pitch with audience feedback.

- Did something confuse your audience last time? Leave it out or find a way to make it clearer.
- Could you see someone’s attention wandering? Try to trim the pitch down a bit.
- Does your pitch include a problem? Offer solutions or potential solutions if you can.
- Practice will make your pitch stronger, just like anything else!
NEXT STEPS

Embellish your pitch as you gain confidence.

- Add a little humor! Even a “dad joke” might help the pitch feel more accessible.
- Develop an analogy or metaphor for the work you’re doing. (“We’re searching for a new material that will soak up and hold onto energy the way a sponge soaks up water.”)
- Take your ideas over to social media (extra points for GIFs or emojis).
Seek out good communications in the wild!

- Follow people who are good communicators on Twitter, TikTok or other platforms.
- Watch TED Talks with a notebook open.
- Read op-eds and look for persuasive techniques you can borrow.
- Seek inspiration in other places, too. What can you learn from a cooking show? From a courtroom drama?
RESOURCES

Want to do a little reading?

- Lisa Cron: Story Or Die
- Nancy Duarte: HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations
- Nancy Baron: Escape from the Ivory Tower
- Faith Kearns: Getting to the Heart of Science Communications
- The Chicago Guide to Communicating Science
- Randy Olson: Huston, We Have a Narrative
- Alan Alda: If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?
THANK YOU

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