

SELLING YOUR RESEARCH IN LESS THAN 3 MINUTES

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You have probably been told many times that you should have an elevator pitch ready... but what exactly is it? An elevator pitch is a short speech that helps you explain your research topic and findings in plain language to your uncle, a friend or someone you meet at a conference. Most people don't want to listen to you rambling on about the intricate details about your findings, so the key is to keep it succinct and focus on the bigger picture. For PhD students, a good opportunity to practice their elevator pitch is by entering the Three Minute Thesis competition. Explaining complex ideas in simple terms is challenging but an essential skill for researchers to have. So how do you actually craft a good elevator pitch?

1. Explain why someone who is not a scientist should care about what you are working on

Can you remember the last time you were asked at a family gathering or a party what you do for a living? Did you have to pause? A good way to start is by introducing the relevance of your research in the context of benefits to society. Essentially, why it needs to be done/why it matters to other people/how it can improve our lives. Will it help cure cancer or solve global warming? Most people won't care about how you synthesise a molecule that can disrupt the interaction between proteins X and Y, but they will care if that molecule can be used to treat cancer. Even if the practical application is a bit far-fetched, you need to make it relevant so they will bother spending the time listening to you in the first place.

2. Make your listeners feel involved

Getting people emotionally involved in your work makes them want to know more about what you do. You may want to include a personal story that others can relate to or how they may be affected by it. Using the word 'imagine' for example builds a bridge between the everyday experience of the audience and the academic work you are presenting. Using analogies is also a great way for listeners to conceptualise what you are explaining, as long as people can easily understand them; otherwise you will end up complicating things further.

3. Stun your audience with numbers and facts

Including statistics is a good way to highlight how important a particular issue is. But it is even more powerful if you can make real world comparisons. For example, instead of saying that the total uncoiled DNA encased in our cells is 2×10^{14} meters long, why not say

that the average person's DNA can stretch from the sun to Pluto and back... 17 times! Also try to use any fun facts you may have uncovered during your research that others may not know. Did you know that there are ten times more bacterial cells in your gut than there are cells in your entire body?

4. Avoid jargon, acronyms and 'academic' words

This should be a no-brainer. There is nothing worse than using jargon or acronyms and making the listener feel stupid for not knowing what they are. This will instantly turn your listeners off. It is important not to make assumptions about the knowledge of your audience. The same goes for name dropping, unless you go on to explain who they are and why they are relevant. An elevator pitch is very different to a conference talk so avoid using terms that are specific to academia. They will not be understood by a non-specialist audience and will make them feel alienated.

5. Speak in an engaging manner

If you don't sound like you care about the topic, why would anyone else care? Even if you are shy by nature, try to speak confidently by rehearsing your elevator pitch. Listen to other people describing their research and pay attention to what you like and dislike. Fake it until you make it!

6. Use humour... carefully!

Humour is a good way to break the ice but should be used carefully and delivered well. Some people are naturally great performers and can deliver jokes with spontaneity. But if that is not you, it is better to keep the jokes out so they don't fall flat.

7. Practice, practice, practice

Practice in front of your work mates, friends and grandmother. If different audiences can understand your elevator pitch clearly, your job is done!

Having an elevator pitch ready will not only help your mum and dad finally understand what you have been doing at university/work for all these years, but it will also be beneficial to your career. Researchers often need to summarise their work while interviewing for a job, writing a grant application, visiting a lab or wooing a potential collaborator at a conference. Have your elevator pitch ready and well-rehearsed because you never know when you will need it next!