

Week 2 Assignment: Elevator Pitch

Due 10/18/10

The elevator pitch serves as a quick introduction to how to distill your research to its most fundamental and most important elements. It's a basis of how to tell the story of your research. It is a helpful exercise for any emerging scientist who on one hand, wants to not bore people at a dinner party and the other, is looking to build interest and engagement with science (or, is just looking for a job!).

1. The Elevator Pitch

An elevator pitch is a concise explanation of what you're doing and why. Ideally, it could pique someone's interest in the time span of a short elevator ride (I find they are useful at family gatherings). Randy Olsen explains in his book "Don't be Such a Scientist" that an elevator pitch should follow basic structure of a story:

- Set up your subject (first act)
- give it a twist at the end of the first act (first plot point)
- reveal a possible solution (second plot point)
- weave all the content together to release the source of tension (third act)

Tim Row of the Cambridge Innovation Center states that a good elevator pitch should follow these rules:

1. Talk in a way your grandparents could understand
2. Don't expect the listener is an expert or knows scientific jargon
3. Prove that you and your team are experts
4. Engage the listeners emotions from the start
5. Show that what you are doing matters

Example:

"I study a star fish on the California coast – the only species that spawns in the dead of winter. I thought it might be due to predators of the eggs being less common that time of year, then I thought it was due to the best timing for the spring algae bloom, but now it looks like it has something to do with the seasonal

migration of the starfish, which is what I now study—the way spawning season may be related to adult movements of starfish.”

“Starfish on the California coast” is the first act set up. “The only species” is the establishment of tension and piques the listener’s interest. “Predators”, “eggs” and “algae bloom” are the multiple themes in the second act. “Seasonal migration” is the release of tension and “What I now study” is the wrap-up

What to do:

1. Brainstorm your set-up, tension point, themes and tension relief.
2. Brainstorm a possible hook. What will draw the audience in?
3. Write 3 test elevator pitches to try out at the next class

2. One-line elevator pitch (aka Sound Byte)

As the always-quotable Mark Twain so succinctly put it, a sound bite is “a minimum of sound to a maximum of sense”. A sound bite should encapsulate the main point of a larger talk or speech into a quick and understandable statement. Mastering the sound byte is critical in our modern, fast-paced communication environment. Cornelia Dean recommends having several on hand for potential interviews.

An effective sound bite will:

- last no longer than 30 seconds
- create instant intrigue
- be memorable
- generate a result (e.g. interest) for the speaker

How do you boil down your research into one sentence? Here’s another example from Randy Olsen:

“I study the one species of starfish that spawns in the dead of winter instead of during the spring season.”

It’s enough to establish the tension and create intrigue about this most unusual starfish.

What to do:

Write 3 one line elevator pitches to test out at the next class.

