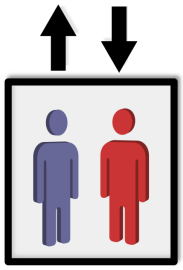
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The Academic Elevator Pitch

How to present your research project in a conversation



The idea of an "elevator pitch" is the following: you occasionally meet the boss of your company in the elevator – your chance to get their support for your new project idea. You have to be creative to make them listen to you in the first place. You will have to convey your message without overwhelming them with too much information. Furthermore, your boss should remember the core message afterwards. And most importantly: you have to be finished before the elevator reaches the boss's floor.

Not relevant for a scientist? Consider, for example, small talk situations during coffee breaks at a conference, a party with friends, or even a job interview. When asked about your research project you only have a very short time to leave a lasting positive impression. To prepare for these situations, we will transfer the concept of the elevator pitch to a scientific context.

Task

Develop your science elevator pitch, i.e., a short and concise answer to the question: "What is your research topic?" Ideally, it should spark interest in your topic and open the possibility for your conversation partner to ask for more details.

Example

- *"In a Hollywood movie, lasers can destroy nearly everything. We use them to exert controlled forces on the surface of single biological cells." (A biophysicist using laser traps to manipulate single cells)*
- *"I make sure that Steven Hawkins can not only enter a building but also get around inside of it" (An interior architect working on accessibility)*
- *"Imagine you are the reviewer for a prestigious conference. You must read several hundred abstracts of applications for talks. I develop software that uses artificial intelligence to help you choose the right speakers and still finish in time." (A computer linguist working on text quality judgment using AI)*

How to Develop an Academic Elevator Pitch

1. Use the ABT template

As a first step you can use the AND-BUT-THEREFORE template to formulate a concise description of your resarch project.

Example

A tiny laser beam can be used to exert controlled forces on the surface of single biological cells.
AND mechanical properties of these cells have a significant impact on processes like tumor growth or wound healing.
BUT up to now the influence of the important messenger calcium in this process is not understood.
THEREFORE I combined our laser device with calcium imaging which enables me to measure calcium influx and cellular mechanics at the same time.

This version will probably still be very much in "scientific jargon". It might already be usable for the coffee break of a scientific conference, but not the way you would really want to respond at a party (unless your goal is to get rid of the person who asked the question).

2. Who are you talking to?

Your future employer, a potential collaborator, or a guest at a party? Choose with whom you want to use your science elevator pitch. The form and the content have to be appropriate for person you are talking to.

3. The goal: what do you want to achieve?

Convince an employer that you are the right person to hire? Find supporters for your new project? Leave a good impression in an introductory round? Your pitch should fit your personal goal exactly.

4. The content

The content depends on your goals:

- What is the main message you want your conversation partner to remember?
- Why should your conversation partner care? Why should they be interested in what you are telling them?

5. The language

The way you present your content should be relatable for your listeners. You have to make it easy for them to understand your main message, stimulate their interest and help them to remember what you said. This can be achieved, e.g., by the use of catchy images, surprising comparisons or exciting stories.

Brainstorming might give you some ideas: what images or comparisons come to your mind that somehow relate to your research project? As a first step write down everything that you can think of. Afterwards pick those ideas that fit with your goal and that your potential listeners are most likely to identify with.

The pitch should open the conversation, i.e., it has to be an invitation for the listener to become active themself. You can, for instance, invite them to ask for more details. The listener should remain curious, so don't tell too much.

6. Write it down, then revise

Starting from the ABT version, try different approaches incorporating the ideas from your brainstroming. Once you have a compelling idea, revise your phrasing to make it even more concise and convincing.

Don't be afraid to leave out information. It is fine if your pitch only includes a fraction of your original ABT version. If you have sparked the interest of the person you are talking to, then you can still deliver the details (e.g. by giving the full ABT answer).