



A Short Guide to Creating Your Elevator Pitch

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Elevator pitches: the five W's

What is an elevator pitch?

Named for the length of time it should take up: no more than a short elevator ride, about 30 seconds. Think of it like your personal film trailer: should be engaging, interesting, and leave them wanting more.

Why do I need one?

Sometimes, things just work out – you are in the right place at the right time, or the head of your dream company is friends with your favorite professor and heard amazing things about you.

Most of the time, however, you'll need to sell it ('it' being your professional self, or your fantastic new business idea), and opportunities to do so will be infrequent and fleeting. You end up standing next to a big shot in your field after a lecture on campus. Someone asks (yet again) what you want to do once you graduate. What do you say?

That's where the elevator pitch comes in.

When/Where (aka in what situations will it be beneficial)?

There are a million situations where elevator pitches are useful. You've probably been using them already without realizing it, or without knowing how to make them better. Think of all the questions you get asked repeatedly by family members and professors and other adults. You probably have stock answers for when people ask you what you study and what you can do with that, when someone asks what your favorite part about studying abroad was, or what your senior thesis is about, if you must write one. Think of your elevator pitch as just another well-honed answer to a question.

What is the question? That depends on your audience.

Who is my audience?

There are several different audiences you can work with, but today we're talking about prospective employers. Just like in writing an essay, you need to identify the goal of your pitch, and the question you want to answer.

For an employer, the question could be: 'Why are you here and what makes you different from all these other people?'

Ok, I've got a question... now how do I answer it?

There are always two ways to questions like these: listing the straight facts and giving the facts as you see them. Your goals are exciting and that excitement should show through in your pitch. After all, if you're not excited, why should they be?

Explain what you do.

To use myself (Katherine, AIFS Alumni Relations Coordinator and Admissions Officer) as an example, I could start by saying:

'I work for an international education company doing study abroad admissions and working with alumni.'

OR

'I work with college students to help them achieve their goals of studying abroad, then assist them in promoting education abroad on their home campuses once they're back.'

Both statements are true, but which one would you rather hear more about? The wording describes two different people: one with a job, and one who ENJOYS their job. You want to come across as the latter – no

employer worth working for wants a drone, they'll want someone with drive and ideas. You need to show them as concisely as possible that you possess both.

What makes you special?

For this, be honest. This is where your salesmanship comes in.

'My personal experience studying, living, and working abroad has given me great insight into the concerns of prospective students and has fueled my passion for promoting international education and exchange.'

What makes me different? I have lived in several countries in several different roles – exchange student, teacher, graduate student, and (briefly) unemployed wanderer. Each of those roles taught me something about the international exchange process and about myself, and I want employers to know that I have the self-awareness to use that knowledge to the benefit of their students.

Bring it back to your audience – ask a question.

This should be used as a way of beginning a conversation, even if the rest of it doesn't happen right now. So, as in any conversation, once you finish your answer, ask a question to keep it going!

The question will vary depending on the audience. If I'm speaking to a potential mentor, I could describe a current project or one I'd like to pursue and ask if they would be willing to get a coffee sometime to discuss my ideas. If I'm looking for a new job and I think they may be able to help, I could explain that I'm exploring my professional options and I'd love to speak to them about their company and how they got started there. If it was a conversation between professional equals, I would simply return the question and ask what their role is, keeping them in mind for future contact. Either way, the goal is to keep the momentum going, so be sure to bring it back around!

Try it yourself:

What do you do/what is your goal? _____

What makes you special? _____

Bring it back: _____

Written vs. spoken language

What I wrote in the previous section, or what you have written for yourself, may read fantastically. But you won't really know how it sounds until you say it out loud a few times. As I'm sure you know, there is a huge difference between written language and spoken language.

I like the pitch I wrote for myself, and it's like parts of cover letters I've written in the past. However, if I said it in conversation the way it's written above, it would sound cumbersome, rehearsed, and inauthentic.

Pay attention to the language you use. You want to sound professional but natural, and without practice that can be a tough line to follow. Typically, we use more elaborate adjectives in professional writing, while in speech we are likely to use the same basic adjectives with added modifiers (ex. 'really great' instead of wonderful, exceptional, or fantastic). That's not necessarily a bad thing, but for a promotional pitch keep in mind that you are speaking in a professional capacity, so try to avoid using the same adjectives and modifiers over and over.

As always, try to avoid fillers (like, um, you know, etc.), as that can make you sound less knowledgeable and authoritative.

So, if I started out by writing this:

'I work with college students to help them achieve their goals of studying abroad, then assist them in promoting education abroad on their home campuses once they're back. My personal experience studying, living, and working abroad has given me great insight into the concerns of prospective students and has fueled my passion for promoting international education and exchange.'

I may end up saying something like this:

'I help out college students with the process of studying abroad, then once they're back I work with them to promote study abroad at their home universities. I have a lot of personal experience studying, living, and working abroad, so I really understand the concerns of prospective students and it's the reason I'm so eager to promote international education and exchange.'

The second one may sound less professional on paper, but read them both out loud and try to sound natural; the first, while nice on paper, sounds like you're reading part of a cover letter, which you are. The second gets those same points across, but uses patterns closer to my natural way of speaking. When read, you can put emphasis and emotion into the right places to convey the passion and conviction that the less sophisticated words don't necessarily convey on their own.

Note: I spent 5 minutes muttering at my desk to get the second one right. It's difficult to write speech, since we ignore rules of structure and grammar while speaking casually that we instinctively put into writing. It may help to record yourself talking for a while about what you want to say, then transcribe what you've recorded. That way you have a base line of your natural patterns to work from.

Practice!

I'm sure everyone has heard the incredibly cheesy grandpa joke ('Excuse me, how do you get to Carnegie Hall?' 'Practice!'). Not very funny, but grandpas know their stuff! Once you have a draft written, read it. Out loud. It will feel a bit stupid at first, sitting alone reading out loud to yourself, but what you've come up with will most likely sound differently to your ear than it does in your head. Record yourself. Practice with your friends. Practice with a professor. Once you have a solid draft, meet with your Career Center to practice and get feedback. The more you practice, the less you'll have to think about what to say when someone asks you who you are and why you're there; the perfect response will just come.