

Leveraging the Elevator Speech into an On-line Class Writing Assignment with Reflection and Feedback

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Introduction

Having students write short dialogs, present them, and then comment on how effective they were is a powerful way of getting students to see that communication is easier when you plan ahead, more persuasive when you consider what's in it for your audience, and often more efficient with fewer words.

In a graduate on-line course, I have been successfully using an Elevator Speech assignment and later reflections on it through a Discussion Board since 2006. My students include medical personnel, regulatory affairs professionals, marketing staff, and various levels of research and management employees. For some, the concept of an elevator speech, limiting what you say on a topic to get maximum impact in potentially minimal time, is a new one. They are asked to write it out succinctly but persuasively, then try it out on a colleague. Then a discussion board elicits thoughtful comments and leads to enriched learning on the part of all the students.

The assignment (Attachment 1) asks students to write less than a page (usually this is too much, but it is difficult for them to understand how many words they can say in a minute) that makes a case in support of accomplishing some aspect of their job. They are supposed to write it as if it is spoken dialog rather than an article or essay. Many of the sources on elevator speeches are aimed at marketing rather than just persuading, so this assignment emphasizes the persuasive aspect rather than necessarily selling, since selling is sometimes a negative concept for workers in the sciences. In addition to receiving feedback on the written assignment, students also have a week to respond to a discussion board asking how it went when they gave the elevator speech to a colleague (they could practice on someone not their boss just to try it out). The thoughtful comments indicate that the assignment teaches a great deal about persuasion, brevity, and presentation skills.

This paper will discuss the current and past thinking on elevator speeches, tips on preparing successful elevator speeches, and three years of student comments that indicate how much students are learning from the assignment.

The Evolution of the Elevator Speech

The first mention of the term "elevator speech" may be in the 1981 edition of Crosby's *The Art of Getting Your Own Way*. It is not mentioned in the 1972 edition of that book. He describes it (p. 48) as "an all-encompassing, action-producing set of ideas that you pronounce while on the elevator with the big boss for just one minute." Later writers such as O'Leary (2008) developed systems for crafting these short speeches. One of the earlier proponents, Woodall (1990, p. 57) stresses putting the point first, then following with just the essential details (pp.22-23). Her book, *How to Talk so Men/Bosses/Committees will Listen*, has chapters on using time wisely: "Say less than you want to say, and say it assertively."

In addition to being focused and informative (Lawn 2008), elevator speeches may also act as self-introductions, so need to include the speaker's name, business name, and how to get in touch with the speaker, according to Wilson's (2001) article on networking in the banking industry. She recommends always giving and getting two business cards so that one can be used for referrals. "Sell yourself short" (2004) points out that highlighting a specific accomplishment is more interesting than naming a generic job, and that the quick introduction needs to sound conversational rather than like a sales pitch.

Since most people want to know what's in it for them, a good elevator speech emphasizes benefits to the listener, not just what the speaker has to offer. Katz (2008) calls this "attraction marketing." Most writers (Mechlinger, 2007, p. 72; Melymuka, 2003, p. 42; Reilly, 2006, p. 16) agree that the benefit statement needs to highlight how the speaker's suggestion is unique and will help the listener reach goals. Emphasizing benefits to the listener is often a new concept for my students, who are more likely to come from a science or technical background than a marketing one. However, Kellaway (2002, p. 10) points out that not every culture thrives on 10-30-second personal commercials. In Britain, she says, people are more likely to stare at their shoes than showcase themselves in an elevator.

Preparing a Successful Elevator Speech

Many of the articles written on elevator speeches are aimed at salespeople, who need to be able to succinctly point out benefits of a product or service. But the main outline of such a speech is one that can help a speaker in nearly any profession. Most writers recommend brevity, focus, benefits, and a memorable action ending:

- Focus on a single objective to get attention
- Follow with essential details, emphasizing benefits to the listener
- Ask for a meeting or a decision

Frank (1990) suggests these steps: Have a clear, single objective; Target the right listener; Prepare a single sentence introduction that focuses on the objective in context of listener benefits; Have a prepared "hook" to help the listener remember your point. Hoff's (1996) outline for a six-minute speech on any topic: Identify a burning issue; Explain why the issue matters; Offer a tangible solution; Detail the benefits and payoff; Sum it up and close the deal. Cahill (1999) calls them hallway presentations, "quickie speeches or discussions given in noisy, public locations such as hallways, elevators, cafeterias, and lobbies." She also mentions the small window of opportunity to access managers and other decision makers for a project, and the importance of capturing the attention and focus of the listener as follows: Grab attention; Identify a key issue; Get to the point; and Ask for a meeting or decision. She recommends practicing and role-playing so that a speaker can be direct and confident without it seeming like a canned speech.

Example: Focus on a single objective to get attention. *John, I've been meaning to ask you about getting a pipette logbook for the QC Biochem lab. I think it would be a good idea to check the calibration of our pipettes weekly. I'm thinking an informal calibration with water at the high and low values, which is then written in a new logbook. I know they are calibrated every three months right now, but this makes deviation investigations really challenging. Compare to the lack of focus here: Who says you can't teach an old dog new tricks? I spent my first 15 years in industry as a pharmaceutical chemist working in both development and discovery labs.* The listener has to be wondering what this is about, if anything. Here is one more example of a good focus statement at the beginning of a short elevator speech: *I think we*

desperately need to get three laptops for the compliance group. Cassie, John, and I could really use them when we go for audits, and also when we have in-house inspections. Instead of typing up our notes that night and then sending them out, we can get the notes to everyone without any delays.

Example: Emphasizing benefits to the listener. *When a pipette fails a calibration check, a deviation investigation is required; we have ten open investigations right now. This looks bad to QA as well as to upper management. Another example: Now that corporate wants us to take over the external audits, we will be traveling to vendors more and can write the reports while we are traveling. This will decrease turnaround time for the audit reports and enable us to help with additional projects.*

Example: Ask for a meeting or a decision. *This extra pipette calibration check would take only about 30 minutes a week from one technician, and it would save us a lot of time. It would also help us close deviation investigations with QA, which is one of the problems we discussed last week. Could we discuss a pipette calibration logbook at the next QC Biochem meeting? Another example from an elevator speech requesting cross training of a new hire: I have a written cross-training plan that outlines how he will learn both cell culture and characterization assays. Can I e-mail you this training plan for your approval?*

My students tend to add too much detail (writer-centered rather than reader-centered writing) by chronologically describing the entire problem area as linear thinkers tend to do. This delays material of interest to the listener, as does inductive reasoning, which provides all the support first, then draws the conclusion. The discussion board that follows the elevator speech assignment is important as it provides time for reflection and growing knowledge about how best to be persuasive in bringing up a topic to a listener.

Student Reflections on Their Elevator Speeches

Over the three years I've used the elevator speech assignments in my on-line graduate communication class, reflection comments show that students have often struggled to be brief enough to be heard, or to focus sharply enough on the most important point, or to sound conversational enough. But the comments also show that students learn a good deal about how to communicate effectively from this assignment. Students also provide helpful advice to other students in the class in this discussion board.

For this discussion board, I give these instructions: *Once you've had a chance to try out your speech on someone (could be a colleague, a spouse, a roommate if you don't want to practice on your boss), comment on how it went, please.*

As students comment on their success or lack of it, I add comments such as those below to help them reflect on how they can change the speech to be more successful:

When you give the speech to someone, you may realize you had too much detail too early, or that you tried to get in too much information overall. Getting to the point quickly should get the boss' attention--then you can add necessary details to encourage the action you want. Since you don't have much time, you need to be concise but specific about the benefits. Remember the "what's in it for me" factor that motivates us all, including your boss. That means using "you attitude" to help the listener to see it your way. Toastmasters and any other practice you can do will help if speaking is not your favorite thing!

This is always one of my favorite assignments, as it helps you "see" how good communication works! I'm pleased that several people were able to shorten their messages to get better reactions. Sometimes it helps to think of a pyramid, with extra detail at the bottom if people ask for it, but the fairly concise message at the top. That way, you can emphasize the advantages to the company or listener of your proposed action and see if more details are necessary for that listener.

In this assignment, students learn that planning ahead and thinking of the main points enables them to be prepared to present the proposed action when the opportunity presents itself. The boss' schedule and mood are variables that can't really be controlled, but a speaker can control when and how the message is presented. If speakers slow down, practice, and be confident that their well-planned message will be heard, they are more likely to succeed.

Student comments on the discussion board after giving their elevator speech are sometimes about their preparation and sometimes about how the speech went.

The Importance of Preparation: While I agree that a good speaker should have confidence and passion, the speech content is equally important. As indicated in the Week 2 PowerPoint presentation, Audience Analysis, the speaker should consider how the speech should be tailored to the audience. And to hold our audience's attention, the WIFM [what's in it for me] factor should also be included. Surely, my boss wants to know "what's in it for me," and what he has to gain in the proposal. Otherwise, my elevator speech could land on deaf ears. -- Kathy

Using the Elevator Speech as a Self-introduction: Our company has an Ambassador Intranet Program to promote the value of our industry in our respective community, so I need to be able to make a good impression when people ask "what do you do?" When making a formal presentation, or speaking one-on-one with customers or colleagues, we raise awareness of our valuable work and reinforce our expertise and leadership in people's eyes. To help employees present information about the company in a consistent manner, our intranet program contains regularly updated resources taken from Annual Report, analyst's information meeting, and other company publications. This is also a very useful tool /resource to help employees understand the operation of the company as a whole, as not all information is conveyed to employees at all tiers. -- Janis

Becoming Familiar and Comfortable with the Speech: Upon practicing my speech a few times, I am learning from my mistakes and would like to have my elevator speech sound effortless, conversational, and natural. I modified the content to eliminate unnecessary words and reworded it to prompt the listener to ask questions. Another aspect to make a speech perfect is to practice often to get familiar and not sound memorized. The main objective of the elevator speech is to answer the listener's "What's in it for me?" Confidence is a must to deliver an effective speech! -- Sapna

The Importance of Revising the Draft of the Speech: I'm a bullet-points persuader rather than a crafted-speech persuader, so I sat down with my written speech to turn it into a set of bullets to deliver. This is my next step prior to raising the issue with my boss. Since I had twelve bullet points, I went back to the drawing board. You have the person's attention "by chance" for a very short time, and have the opportunity to pitch an idea. Instead of an elevator, I may run into my boss in our common kitchen. There isn't time in this setting for an infomercial, and the manager is not an audience -- this is a conversation. So what I need in my mind is not twelve things to say, but three things...four at most. So

what are the key things that REALLY need to be said? When I walk away from the conversation, what are the things that have to have been conveyed in order for my pitch to have any hope of success? -- Mitch

Using Limited Time Efficiently: Even if you're crafting the speech for conversational flow, planning with a bullet points outline seems like a useful tool to evaluate conciseness and to ensure you really have the most important points included. When you're thinking about a one-minute pitch, that type of evaluation in preparation has a lot of value. I know when I crafted mine, I was surprised how quickly a minute went. I timed my initial draft and found I was already at a minute without making it seem rushed and not conversational. So, in revising it, I was evaluating --- do I really have my most important points included (seeing as I didn't have any room to lengthen it)? This is where a "bullet points analysis" could be useful. -- Steve

Making the Speech Sound Conversational: How did it go? I practiced my speech in front of a group of 10 or so on Tuesday. I tried to memorize the speech prior to giving it as I did not want use notes. However, I know that I deviated from my written speech. In other words, I delivered the points of the speech, but I know I did forget some of the justification points. If I had read the speech or memorized the speech word-by-word, I feel that it would not have been taken as genuine and creditability would be put into question. In retrospect, I need to find some method of memorizing all the important points of my speech. Also, I have some concern about tone of my voice. I need to make sure my voice reflects the concern and willingness to solve the problem. -- Kathy

Using the Speech as a First Step Toward Action: It sounds as if many of you had much better luck than I did with your elevator speech. I gave my speech or the bullet points from it to my boss. The concept of the speech was to get resources for a project that would provide the company a positive image in the community but would not provide any direct financial incentive. Unfortunately timing is also an important point to consider when giving this speech as we recently had a project priority list given out that eliminated many projects. Trying to propose a new project after many were just eliminated, and one that doesn't create a profit for a company, doesn't necessarily make for an easy sell. The positive thing that came out of it is that I was asked to explain this alternative type of regulatory submission to our new regulatory associates. So it seems my one minute elevator speech may have turned into a half hour presentation. -- Mike

Struggling with Selling an Idea in Person: I'm not a very salesmanlike sort of person, and I'm having trouble getting up the nerve to approach my boss with my proposal. This is in spite of the fact that he's very approachable and not intimidating, and that what I plan to propose is not controversial. What I'm proposing is adding a wizard feature to our software, and I've given a detailed written proposal to him once before (I want to bring it back to his attention--it's been several months). As regards the prospects for success, the real risk is that he'll listen attentively to me, then take the proposal and leave it somewhere on his desk where it will never be heard from again! But it's not as though I'll be treated disrespectfully in person. Still, I have a hard time making myself do this. Trying to persuade someone of something in person is just not a strong suit for me. Ideas? -- Mitch

Advice from another Student: I "hear" you about getting enough nerve to present it, because I was once there too. Some years ago, I was required to conduct meetings once a month in front of 200-300 members of management. I was so nervous about messing up those meetings that I would type out a script to "read" to management (I hid the script in my portfolio when I went to the lectern). I joined Toastmasters to try to improve my presentation skills. Fast forward to 2007-2008... I have done product

presentations to management. I have conducted software training at many locations in the United States and in Sweden. All I can say is that it takes practice, practice, and more practice. Toastmasters really works! -- Kathy

Point of View of a Beginning Student in the Field: I really haven't worked in regulatory or a hospital for very long so I don't have much to go on. In my department, we have very limited space. So when I first started part-time here, I was put in an area at the front of our office to help when monitors, supplies, or doctors came in. Recently we had a few employees leave and so there are now some open offices, so my elevator speech describes why I would be more efficient with my work if I were in an office. I haven't had a chance to share this speech with my manager yet because she is very busy lately; however, I have tried it out on a friend. I was told it was good and got right to the point. So I guess we'll see if it works once I find an opportunity to present it. -- Amber

Speech Based on a Resource Issue at a Past Job: I was managing a client project that was behind schedule and required an additional chemist in order to deliver a set of compounds on time. It was going to take one chemist three months to finish the project, while two could complete it in one and a half months or possibly less. My argument was that despite the project being over budget, the company needed to spend another three months of employee time and the associated cost on the program one way or the other. Meeting the deadline guaranteed a happy client that would be willing to use us for new contracts. A late compound delivery promised an unhappy client, no future work, and the risk of a bad reputation in the chemistry community. I performed the speech for one of my former coworkers, who said he would have assigned a second person to the program in spite of the tight staffing situation. If I'd actually used this strategy in my past job, I could have saved myself several sleepless nights. I found it was important to practice the speech many times. My audience interrupted to ask a question a couple of times and it would have been easy to lose my place and the flow of my argument if I hadn't been well prepared. -- Pat

Another Resource Use Speech: Well, I got to try out my elevator speech, but not in the elevator, but pretty close to it in a hallway. My speech was about hiring some temporary employees to help out so that the month-end deadlines could be kept. If we didn't hire temps, then my group would be spending time copying, collating, and preparing binders. When I pointed out that FDA commitments could slip, other commitments made to customers in other departments would not be kept, and the relatively low cost of a couple of temp employees for a few weeks, my manager was convinced and told me to bring the temps in. It was actually pretty easy, when he saw what he would gain versus what he would lose. -- Laura

The Importance of Slowing Down: I tried a couple of different scenarios for my elevator speech. I wrote out what I thought I was going to say and then timed myself. I found that I was adding a lot of detail that was probably unnecessary. One of the lectures spoke to that point (people feel the need to tell others everything they know on a subject). After I reworked it slightly, I went through the timed speech again, and it was almost exactly one minute. I tried it out on a colleague, and I found myself speaking very quickly. I think I just wanted to get it all out before someone could ask a question or derail my thought process. After I made myself slow down and breathe, it worked perfectly. -- Maria

Presenting Bullet Points Conversationally: Rather than memorizing a script like a telemarketer, it seems easier to identify the key points I need to hit and flow with the conversation. For me, this is easier than trying to compose a naturally-flowing dialogue and presenting from that. -- Steve

Using the Practice Session as an Editing Tool, 1: I actually did my elevator speech in a private, one-on-one with a co-worker familiar with my work, letting them know the purpose of it and what I was going after. My speech was about my company's website plans for incorporating the new regulations on clinical trial registries, which is part of my job at my company. I've been trying to corner my boss on committing to a timeframe for getting this project up-and-running, so it was good I rehearsed this with my co-worker, as my co-worker said my presentation was too wordy, and needed whittling down. I actually took this feedback to heart, and used it against what I had turned in for my assignment (FYI: my original write-up took up an entire page; after the feedback, I condensed it to half a page). I am still waiting for the opportune time to present to my boss, but it was definitely good I rehearsed this with a co-worker first (and before I turned in my assignment)! -- Erik

Using the Practice Session as an Editing Tool, 2: The first version of my elevator speech was too long and did not get to the point directly. I changed it multiple times and finally I got what I thought is the right version. I tried my last version with a colleague (who acted as my boss). I managed to tell the whole speech in about one minute. I told the whole speech in my normal tone and I was not rushing or anything due to a lot of practice and memorization. My colleague told me that the part where I explained the benefit of my proposal (the part of what's in it for me) is the most important and effective part of the whole speech. This part was very motivating and kept his attention to me until I finished the speech. I think overall my speech went just fine. -- Ahmed

Using the Speech as a First Action Step: My speech occurred walking up the stairs with my associate director. I told him about our increase in investigations the past few months and how this new software, Taproot Analysis, can help us out in expediting investigation write-ups and assessments. I told him this would really help our metrics out and our turn-around time with closing these investigations. He said he was aware of this software because other departments use it as well. He said he would get back to me. I told him in the meantime, I would research how much the software is going to cost. So far, so good. -- Diane

Conclusion

The elevator speech assignment provides a good way for graduate students to learn how to present themselves and their ideas professionally. It is specific enough that it is interesting to read, is helpful enough so that students find it useful rather than academic work, and provides a springboard to a very interesting discussion board in which students reflect on the assignment and come up with some very good insight into their own communication abilities and those of their classmates. Over the past three years, I have found that this assignment provides more interaction than many on-line assignments.

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Attachment 1

The Elevator Speech Assignments

First step: Create an elevator speech about a work situation

You've been trying for days to get your boss's attention on a work situation (dedication of resources, time schedule for a project, etc.) that's critical to accomplishing your job. But no luck. Now, as chance would have it, you're alone together in the elevator. You have one minute to make your case...

For this assignment, students will be writing a persuasive argument less than one page in length that makes a case in support of accomplishing some aspect of your job. This should be written as though it were a spoken dialog, and should be succinct but convincing.

In the following week, you'll be asked to practice an elevator speech on someone and share how it went. You may use the written speech you submitted or another. Submit this assignment using the [Assignments Upload](#) area. When you upload your file, select the title Elevator Speech.

Second step: Try your elevator speech out on a colleague and get feedback

Try out your speech on someone (could be a colleague, a spouse, a roommate if you don't want to practice on your boss) so you can see how and where it is most effective. When you give the speech to someone, you may realize you had too much detail too early, or that you tried to get in too much information overall. Getting to the point quickly should get the boss' attention--then you can add necessary details to encourage the action you want. Since you don't have much time, you need to be concise but specific about the benefits. Remember the "what's in it for me" factor that motivates us all, including your boss. That means using "you attitude" to help the listener to see it your way.

Third step: Reflect on how the elevator speech worked for you

After you've had a chance to try out your elevator speech, comment on how it went, please.

This is always one of my favorite assignments, as it helps you "see" how good communication works! I'm pleased that several people were able to shorten their messages to get better reactions. Sometimes it helps to think of a pyramid, with extra detail at the bottom if people ask for it, but the fairly concise message at the top. That way, you can emphasize the advantages to the company or listener of your proposed action and see if more details are necessary for that listener.

Some of you have pointed out that planning ahead and thinking of your main points enables you to be prepared to present your proposed action when the opportunity presents itself. As you say, the boss' schedule and mood are variables you can't really control, but you can control when and how you present your message.

And, yes, slow down, practice, and be confident that your well-planned message will be heard!

Discussion Board Rules and Limitations

To make the discussion board most useful, students are asked to respond several times during the week, not just at the beginning or the end. They must also make a substantial contribution, not just agree with the previous posting. These instructions are part of the section telling students how to use the boards:

Your postings should advance the group's negotiation of ideas and meanings about the material; that is, your contributions should go beyond a "ditto." Some ways you can further the discussion include:

- expressing opinions or observations. These should be offered in depth and supported by more than personal opinion.
- making a connection between the current discussion and previous discussions, a personal experience, or concepts from the readings,
- commenting on or asking for clarification of another student's statement,
- synthesizing other students' responses, or posing a substantive question aimed at furthering the group's understanding.