All About Elevator Speeches

What is an Elevator Speech and Why Do I Need One?

What it is

The Elevator Speech (ES) is a 90-second talk about what you do, why you do it, and why it’s important. You could think of it as a conversational abstract.

Why it’s useful

“First learn the meaning of what you say, and then speak.” –Epictetus

The ES is an important tool for capturing the meaning of one’s work and then explaining it to a general or cross-disciplinary audience, potential collaborators, funding sources, job interviewers, and more.

How it develops critical thinking

Although the ES itself is composed in advance and rehearsed, its deeper value is in the process of creating a highly compressed summary of complex research pursuits, in translating difficult technical concepts into lay language, and in applying concise analogies. Speakers must confront how well they can truly articulate their science as they attempt to explain it to a lay educated audience.

The ES aids trainees in presenting themselves in meetings, conferences, and interviews because after creating it, the key words, phrases, and concepts come to mind more readily later, when these elements are needed. Even though the complete, rehearsed speech may never be delivered straight through, the exercise of having created, ordered, and articulated the elements is valuable.

Elevator Speech Myths & Facts

Myth: What I do is too complicated to explain in 90 seconds.

Fact: Not if you think it through and use good examples and analogies. The audience doesn’t need to understand the entire background of your discipline, they just need to get the gist of what you’re doing. They’ll ask questions if they don’t understand something.

Myth: If I don’t put in a lot of technical detail and jargon, people will think I’m not very impressive.

Fact: On the contrary. Great thinkers and eminent scientists don’t need to hide their ideas behind intimidating and opaque language.

Myth: If I start talking like this, I’ll forget how to speak to experts.

Fact: Not true. It’s another style to add to your repertoire. Different styles are effective in different contexts.