
How Good Is Your Elevator Speech?

Part of the “Meeting Your Project’s Objectives” module

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How Good is Your Elevator Speech?

Speaking Compellingly and Concisely About Your Project

“Elevator speech” isn’t the best label: people don’t spend that much time in elevators. And when they talk with others on the job, it’s usually a conversation, not a speech.

Still, the term is useful shorthand. You may not find yourself talking to someone while the elevator moves from the second floor to the eighth. You *will* find yourself discussing your work or your services in informal situations. You’ll want to do so effectively. You’ll want your side of the conversation to be:

- **Concise:** focused, brief, to the point
- **Complete:** covering essentials
- **Connected:** related to your audience’s interest
- **Compelling:** maintaining the interest of your audience (even an audience of one)

Experienced CTOs and other USAID professionals concur: it’s advantageous to speak briefly and effectively about your project. They cite such situations as these:

- Your supervisor asks, as she’s getting ready for a meeting on another topic, “What’s going on in your project?”
- You encounter a HPN officer, visiting your office for some other reason, whose country could benefit from your project.
- Someone makes a comment—or a wisecrack—related to your project. (“Will they *ever* have results?” “Are they *still* promoting that?”)

Some opportunities are informal but not inconsequential: you may have five minutes to talk about your project during portfolio review. What you say and how you make your case could affect funding for the coming year.

Whatever the situation, you want to maximize the positive impact you have. A successful elevator speech depends on preparation and practice.

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How Good is Your Elevator Speech?

How Good is Your Elevator Speech? focuses on both preparation and practice. Preparation—knowing what you want to say—isn't sufficient to build skill. This workshop allows you to practice and to receive constructive feedback from others who are also honing their elevator-speech skills.

Here are the steps you'll follow today, or any time you want to practice:

- **Specify the situation.** Choose a likely situation. Choose when and where you'd be speaking. Identify your audience (whether an individual or a group).
- **Prepare what you want to say.** Unlike the typical workday, today you'll have time to organize your thoughts and select the best points or examples.
- **Practice in a small setting.** You can choose your audience—even an audience of one—and speak with little risk of getting things “wrong.”
- **Listen to yourself afterward.** When you record your conversation and replay it, you gain a new perspective on how you appear to others. You'll recognize strengths as well as areas for improvement.
- **Critique yourself and others.** You'll use a checklist, guidelines for feedback, and other tools for reviewing your own presentation as well as those of others. You and your partners will share critiques in a cooperative setting.
- **Summarize goals for the future.** After you've delivered your own elevator speech and heard your partners deliver theirs, as a group you'll describe what you want to do and what you want to avoid doing when you next have an opportunity to speak informally about your project.

How Good is Your Elevator Speech?

The Elevator Speech Checklist

On page 7, you'll find a checklist to use in critiquing an elevator speech. Here are explanations of the criteria used on the checklist:

CONNECTED: does the speech relate to the audience?	
Criteria	Explanation
At the beginning, confirmed initial question or comment; stated purpose	Make sure you've heard correctly; make sure audience knows where you're going.
Response to follow-up Qs/comments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledged Q/comment • Was clear; understandable; organized • Seemed persuasive 	In an effective elevator speech, you're in a brief conversation. You want to show you're both listening to and responding to your audience.
Related remarks to audience's interest	A key component: your audience's unspoken question, "What's in it for me?"
Used language clear to audience; avoided acronyms and jargon.	Specialized language and shorthand are useful when you're sure the audience understands. Still, it's more helpful to make your point clearly than to leave someone confused.

CONCISE: does the speech fit the time and place?	
Criteria	Explanation
Began with high-level; offered to give further detail	To stay brief, avoid <i>giving</i> detail. Instead, look for highlights and make an offer to go further.
Offered follow-up (E.g., "...we don't have time..," "...if you want to know more...")	Manage time by volunteering to continue another time or to forward information later
Avoided irrelevant detail	If you like details, "a lot" seems just right—but if your audience wants high points, a little detail seems like a lot to them.

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COMPELLING: does the speech gain and hold attention?	
Criteria	Explanation
Described advantages/ achievements of the project/proposal	Describe accomplishments and outcomes (what's been done) rather than activity (what's going on) unless you have clear signs of interest in details of activity.
Made persuasive argument for accepting/supporting project/proposal	Even if your audience isn't in a position to give material support, you're seeking agreement about the worth of your project
Highlighted results, outcomes (e.g., for possible use elsewhere)	When you show how your project produces results that can benefit others, you increase the impact of your elevator speech.

CONTENT: does the speech include information essential for understanding your project?	
Criteria	Explanation
Described goals/objectives of project/proposal	Why does the project matter?
Described activities/components	What does the project involve? <i>(Be brief!)</i>
Included relevant, up-to-date information	Demonstrate that you know what's going on – and what relates to the audience's interest.
Described timing/schedule	Think big picture. Don't get lost in months (or even quarters).
Highlighted results, outcomes with likely value elsewhere (beyond project)	When you show how your project produces results that can benefit others, you increase the impact of your elevator speech.

How Good is Your Elevator Speech?

DELIVERY: how do you present the material?	
Criteria	Explanation
Maintained good pace (not too fast, not too slow)	When you've prepared and practiced, you're not as worried about "getting everything in." You can tailor your speech to the time and place.
Varied tone of voice (avoided monotone)	Don't lecture; it's not <i>really</i> a speech.
Fit talk to timeframe (didn't rush or run over)	Be mindful of the time. Plan to stop on schedule. If you perceive high interest, <i>offer</i> to extend ("I don't want to take too much of your time...").

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Giving Useful Feedback

Anyone who wants to improve performance needs feedback on that performance. If you don't know how you're doing, you can't improve.

The practice sessions in this workshop include the opportunity to both give and receive feedback. On the next page, you'll find ways to give feedback that's constructive, objective, specific, and given in a way that helps the other person hear what's being said.

How Good is Your Elevator Speech?

How to Give Useful Feedback

What you can do	Reasons to do it
Use the <i>Elevator Speech Checklist</i> both to observe and to give feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The checklist helps you focus as you listen to someone else. ▪ The items on the checklist are key factors for an effective speech. ▪ Using the checklist helps you provide specific, non-threatening feedback.
In the workshop practice sessions, make sure the small group plays back the tape before people deliver their feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Playback gives the speaker a chance to hear his or her own voice. ▪ Saving comments till after feedback allows the speaker to hear how he or she sounded – something that’s rare in the workday.
Tell the speaker what he or she did that you found effective. Be specific.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The speaker may not see this as effective – or even as a factor. (We’re often our own worst critics.) ▪ Specific feedback on what we’ve done well increases the likelihood that we’ll do it again in similar circumstances.
Avoid false praise. Don’t tell the speaker “you did X well” if that really wasn’t the case.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ False praise doesn’t help a person build on strengths or work on weaknesses. ▪ False praise also squanders the opportunity to help in a professional, collegial way.
Tell how the speech affected you: did you learn something? Change an opinion? Feel some impact?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Speakers often have little to go on besides facial expressions, which can be hard to read. ▪ Clear statements of how you reacted encourage openness.
Frame your feedback so that the speaker can hear what you’re saying.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It’s easy to sound blunt when you meant to be helpful. ▪ Example: “Next time you might...” is more helpfully worded than “you shouldn’t have...”

Elevator Speech Checklist

	<i>Criteria</i>	✓	<i>Comments</i>
CONNECTED	At the beginning, confirmed question / comment; stated purpose		
	Response to follow-up Qs / comments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledged • Clear; understandable; organized • Persuasive 		
	Related remarks to audience's interest		
	Used language clear to audience; avoided acronyms and jargon.		
CONCISE	Began with high-level; <i>offered to give further detail</i>		
	Offered follow-up ("...we don't have time / if you want to know more...")		
	Avoided irrelevant detail		
COMPELLING	Described advantages/ achievements of the project/proposal		
	Made persuasive argument for accepting/supporting project/proposal		
	Highlighted results, outcomes (e.g., for possible use elsewhere)		
CONTENT	Described goals/objectives of project/proposal		
	Described activities/components		
	Included relevant, up-to-date information		
	Described timing/schedule		
	Highlighted results, outcomes with likely value elsewhere (beyond project)		
DELIVERY	Maintained good pace (not too fast, not too slow)		
	Varied tone of voice (avoided monotone)		
	Fit talk to timeframe (didn't rush or run over)		
Other (specify)			

Exercise: Evaluating an Elevator Speech

Overview

In this exercise, you'll listen to an elevator speech and consider the factors that make it effective.

Part 1: Listen to a speech

- Read through the materials above, especially the evaluation factors that begin on page 3 and the checklist on page 7.
- Listen to a recording or a demonstration of someone giving an elevator speech.
- Use the checklist and make notes regarding:
 - Things you think the speaker did well.
 - Things that you think the speaker might consider doing differently.

Part 2: Discuss its effectiveness

Compare and discuss your individual assessment of this elevator speech with the others at your table. Develop consensus answers for each question (what was done well, would could be done differently).

Post your questions on the flipchart.

Part 3: Share your group's opinion

A person from each group will discuss the group's results from Part 2.

Exercise: Delivering Your Elevator Speech

Overview

This practice exercise has three parts.

In **Part 1**, you'll choose a topic for your speech. Individually, you'll make notes about the person you'll be speaking to and about what you want to say.

(Timeframe: about 5 minutes.)

In **Part 2**, you'll work as part of a team of three. You and your teammates will present your elevator speeches to one another. Each person will fill three different roles:

- You'll present your own speech.
- You'll be an observer as one teammate presents to the other.
- You'll be the audience for the third teammate's speech.

At the end of each speech, you'll give and receive useful critiques.

(Timeframe: about 30 minutes per round of speech and critique; 90 minutes in all.)

In **Part 3**, you and your colleagues will note and discuss specific things you've learned from the exercise.

(Timeframe: about 30 minutes.)

Part 1: Choose a topic

- Part 1 is an individual activity; work on your own rather than with your teammates.

Preparing for your elevator speech

Use the Elevator Speech Background form (example on the next page) to provide background for your elevator speech.

(In Part 2, one of your teammates will use this background when he or she acts as your audience.)

- Write your name in the space at the top.
- Choose a situation: check one of the four suggestions, or check Situation E and create your own. Include background information as indicated.
(Note: avoid naming a specific person. Use terms like “my boss,” “the head of such-and-such an office,” “the CTO of a bilateral project in country X.”)
- Describe your objective—what you’d like to achieve in the conversation. This is your objective for the elevator speech, not for your project (or whatever your topic is).
- Include comments or questions you could expect from your audience as you talk—either about your project in general, or about things you say during the conversation.

Once you’ve written the background, you can use the space on page 12 to make notes for yourself about what you want to say.

Delivering Your Elevator Speech

Elevator Speech Background

Name: _____

- Situation A:**
 An upper-level USAID manager stops by your office and asks, "How's your project going?"
- Situation B:**
 You've just run into a visiting HPN officer. You've wanted to acquaint her with your project; her mission might even be a source of funds. She indicates that yes, she can talk for a moment.
- Situation C:**
 In a meeting, someone asks a question about your project.
(Describe the audience and question in the space below "Your own situation.")
- Situation D:**
 In a meeting, another CTO/TA or a director (not your boss) makes a remark that's really a criticism or crack about your project.
(Describe the audience and question in the space below "Your own situation.")
- Situation E: Your own situation**
(Describe the setting here; describe the audience and question below.)

For situations C, D, or E	Audience:
	Opening question/comment:

Your objective for this conversation:
Likely comments or questions from this person during the conversation:

Delivering Your Elevator Speech

Part 2: Present your speech

In Part 2, you'll work with two teammates. Each person will have a turn in all three roles:

- **The speaker:** the person talking about his or her project
- **The audience:** the person described on the speaker's background sheet
- **The observer:** someone not part of the conversation; the observer records the conversation and makes notes on the elevator-speech checklist

Directions

Choose two teammates. Try to choose people you don't usually work with. With your teammates, decide who'll take which role.

Round	Speaker	Audience	Observer
1			
2			
3			

Arrange your chairs so all three people can see and hear each other.

Test the tape recorder:

- Place it where it can record both speaker and audience.
- Start recording; have all three teammates speak briefly.
- Rewind and play back to make sure you can hear everyone.

(It's important is to capture the words of both speaker and audience. If necessary, switch chairs or reposition the recorder at the beginning of each round.)

Follow the steps on the next page for each round.

Delivering Your Elevator Speech

Directions for each round:

1.	<p>Speaker: Briefly describe the situation to your teammates. Give the background sheet to the person who'll be your audience.</p>
2.	<p>Audience: Read the background sheet; ask questions to clarify your role.</p>
3.	<p>Observer: Position and check the recorder. When Speaker is ready, turn on the recorder. Use the checklist to make notes during the conversation.</p>
4.	<p>Speaker: Begin elevator speech. Audience: Ask questions, make comments as appropriate.</p>
5.	<p>Observer: When conversation ends or when facilitator calls time, stop recording and rewind the tape.</p>
6.	<p>Speaker: Before hearing the tape, talk briefly about (a) things you did that you thought were effective, (b) things you'd include, leave out, or say differently next time.</p>
7.	<p>Observer: Play back the speech. If anyone wants to comment during playback, stop the tape. (The Observer should mainly use the checklist to guide his or her comments.) Audience: Make any comments from the perspective of your role in the speech: was it effective, were your questions and comments addressed, how well did the speaker achieve his or her objectives?</p>
8.	<p style="text-align: center;">Repeat until everyone has given an elevator speech.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>(Timeframe: approximately 30 minutes per round; 90 minutes in all.)</i></p>

(The suggestions for giving feedback appear on page 5.)

(After the three rounds, please wait for instructions before continuing to Part 3.)

Highlighting What You've Learned

Part 3: Highlight what you've learned

Complete task 3A as individuals. Then complete task 3B with the people at your table.

Directions for 3A:

Individually, without discussion, answer the questions below.

What do I want to do when speaking briefly and effectively about my project?

What do I want to avoid doing when speaking briefly and effectively about my project?

(After each person has completed Part 3A, go on to Part 3B on the next page.)

Highlighting What You've Learned

Directions for 3B:

With the people at your table:

- Share what each of you has written.
- Agree on team answers to the two questions.
- Post your team answers on the flipchart.

Directions for 3C:

The facilitators will lead a discussing during which each team reports its answers.

Elevator Speech Checklist

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Elevator-Speech Background

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Likely comments or questions from this person during the conversation: