

“Giving a good elevator talk” Exercise

Learning Objectives: Students learn how to give a brief 2-5 minutes overview of their research interests and start a conversation about research.

Elevator talks should focus on the problem they are trying to solve, versus generalities. For example, instead of starting with: “I work on programming languages” or “I work on dynamic analysis” a better icebreaker is: “I am working on making programs more reliable by using dynamic error recovery.”

Activity: In a group meeting, discuss motivation and content of a good “elevator” talk. Give your own elevator talk to the students as an example, and maybe have another more senior student give an example. Give the students a few days to create and practice their own elevator talks. Hold a group meeting where they each practice their elevator talks with each other, and the group critiques and refines them. You could actually do this activity in an elevator in your building for fun, as you all hop in the elevator with one person charged with giving their elevator talk before you get to the top floor.

A Variation: Use this exercise as an icebreaker. Charge each student with giving a plausible, *but bad*, elevator talk. Hold a discussion over why the elevator talks are “bad”. Have fun and add humor as the “bad” talks are given, but also bring out the major points to be discussed for good elevator talks and also focus students on what is important in their topic.

Key points for 1-minute elevator research talk:

- Why is your research problem an interesting problem?
- Why is it important?
- Why is your solution unique?

Key points for a 3-minute elevator research talk:

- Cover the same points but slant to a different audience. Give more background, for instance, or more detail, depending on their familiarity with your overall research area

Sometimes at the undergraduate level, you will have students who have not started research yet, and sometimes you have students who are already involved in research. For the early/no prior research student, the elevator talk is slightly different. Here, the student can focus on:

- What research areas are of particular interest to you?
- What is intriguing about those areas to you and why?