

Your 30-second story: A key tool for job seekers

Getting the job you want requires selling yourself to other people, usually strangers. We are not all natural salespeople, eager to talk about ourselves to others, quick to think on our feet. Thinking about and preparing your “30-second story” will strengthen your communication and improve your chances of winning interviews and jobs.

What is a 30-second story? A “30-second story” (sometimes referred to as an “elevator pitch”) is a very short description of who you are, what you want, where you are going, and how you can contribute. Delivering a strong story takes thought, effort, and practice. Being prepared with your 30-second story often makes the difference between a failed and a successful encounter, interview, networking or sales opportunity.

Why do you need it? Today we live in a ‘tweet’ world in which information, patience, and attention spans have been reduced to mini-bite sizes. If we don’t “grab” our audience quickly, they lose interest, become distracted, and move on. We have only a few seconds to make our point.

Who are the recipients of your 30-second story? You will use your “story” to talk to anyone who is interested in learning who you are, and perhaps trying to help you find employment (or customers, or sales prospects).

Why is a 30-second story powerful? The power comes from the confidence of your understanding and being able to communicate who you are in a clear, forceful way. What is more compelling than speaking to someone who knows who they are and what they want? It’s almost irresistible, and people are drawn to help.

When will you use it? Once you prepare your story, you will discover many uses for it! It provides the foundation for the answer to the most dreaded interview question of all, “Tell me about yourself.” It helps define you whenever you are networking with a colleague, or introducing yourself to someone new.

What should be in it? The story telegraphs a few key points that are interesting *to your listener*. There are many things to know about you, from your personal and professional histories. Your mission is to select the few nuggets that will be meaningful for a particular situation (and omit distractions). The word “story” may be misleading, for it should not be a fiction, but an honest description, maybe anecdotal.

How many 30-second stories do you need? You may need more than one, as each should be tailored for a specific situation and audience. The story I use in my volunteer work is different from one I use in a professional situation. The story I use to describe my resume writing expertise differs from the story that describes my human resources experience. All are versions of the truth about my history.

Here are some questions to help you prepare your story:

1. **What are you trying to accomplish?** What result do you want from this encounter? For example, you may want the name of someone else to talk to. You may be trying to make a sale. You may want an appointment for an interview. You may want specific information to help you make a decision or decide if a career path

is appropriate for you (if so, list the information you are seeking).

2. **What are your audience's concerns and issues?** In a hiring situation, what are they looking for? What qualities or experiences would be most important to them? What do they care about?
3. **Why do you want this position?** Think about the deeper reasons that would relate to the employer, not the superficial ones. (Employers don't care that you want to make more money or commute less. They care about hiring people who will make them more successful than they are now.)
4. **What is your key phrase or theme?** It might be your branding statement or something out of your experience. (What is mine, you might ask? "My mission is to get you the job you want by making your light shine.") As you review what you have written down, you might see some common threads that will help unify your story.

And a few tips:

1. **Use good brainstorming techniques.** Let all of your ideas out, unfiltered, uncriticized. Let them simmer on paper and in your brain for a day or two, then return to them and start editing.
2. **Tell the truth.** Don't try to make a story more than it is.

3. **Tell a story.** The most powerful assets you have are your prior experiences and how you communicate them. "Headlines" don't work ("I always meet my deadlines," "I know how to solve problems," "I'm a team player"). Tell a story that illustrates your point - "put meat on the bones" - and it will be remembered.
4. **Use simple, graphic language.** Lose the jargon. Try to "draw a picture" with your words.
5. **Practice.** It is *not* a good idea to memorize your story. It *is* a good idea to write down the key points and practice them until you are comfortable with them. Practice out loud, practice in front of a mirror. Try it out on family or friends, videotape or record it to get some feedback.
6. **Aim for about 150 words** – 30-60 seconds. So, start with all your thoughts, then keep cutting until you get there!
7. **Deliver your story with passion!** Your enthusiasm for your subject will be contagious – be sure to communicate your passion! Practicing will help reduce nervousness and increase your confidence.
8. **End with a question.** Questions re-engage your listener. The question may be about the job, the company, some process or policy.