

LESSON PLAN 2 – THE ELEVATOR PITCH

In this session, the students will learn how to develop disparate ideas into a cohesive foundation for a story, using the formula studios use to make elevator pitches.

Elevator Pitch: Also called a logline, this is a short explanation of what your movie is going to be about. No more than three lines.

Here's how I explain an elevator pitch to students.

Picture the scene. You're in an elevator in a hotel in LA. A person in a very expensive suit steps into the elevator beside you.

It's (insert name of popular director here) A good option might be Kevin Feige, the main architect of the Marvel Universe, or Kathleen Kennedy, who was the main architect of the Star Wars universe for a very long time.

They're on the phone. They're saying that they need an idea. A great idea. They have a billion dollars in their back pocket for the next great idea.

And you tap them on the shoulder. You say you have it. Something incredible. Something exciting.

And they say 'you have until I get out of this elevator to tell me your idea.'

That's an elevator pitch. A short, succinct explanation of your idea. It isn't a million miles away from what you might receive in school from a teacher as homework, or what a writing competition might ask you to do in order to enter.

It's a prompt that pushes you to write.

2.2 – THE FORMULA

At this stage, the students will have decided on their genres and feel comfortable with the type of furniture you normally identify with them. It's time for them to put together an elevator pitch that will form the foundation for the rest of the treatment.

This is a simple blueprint for the students to follow in crafting their own elevator pitch.

PERSON

PROBLEM

PLACE

These three elements are essentially;

CHARACTER

PLOT

SETTING

A person has a problem, they must solve it, and in doing so navigate a space that in some way affects the story. This is every story ever written to some degree, and students will recognise that in the stories they know really well.

Toy Story: A child's favourite toy gets jealous of the new toy in the house.

Lion King: The actual elevator pitch for this was 'Bambi in Africa,' according to its writer.

Iron Man: After a crisis of conscience, a weapons inventor decides to be a hero.

It's also important to talk at this point about originality. There is no such thing as an original idea really – just different executions of the same ideas we've seen

before. Often, changing just one of the above things is going to make the whole story fresher. A superhero story set in Carlow is going to feel very original compared to one set in New York, for example.

2.3 - CLASS EXERCISE

In either a verbal back-and-forth, individually on paper or in their groups, ask students to write elevator pitches for movies they have already seen.

Who is the main character? What is the problem they are trying to deal with?
Where is the story set?

Once these are established, you can then invite students to try and connect these three pillars of storytelling. What effect does the setting have on the characters? How does trying to solve the problem change the characters, or the setting?

It's important to clarify that these effects can be small, or they can be huge. For example, American superheroes wear red and blue and white, because that is the colour of the American flag, and those colours culturally invoke their idea of a hero. That is the 'place' influencing the 'person.'

Are characters different at the end of their stories than at their beginning? Yes - the plot has forced them to learn new skills, new abilities, and to make new friends in order to solve the problem in front of them.

These might seem obvious, but students feel very empowered by realising they know these connections on an instinctual level and are now getting to put names to them.

2.4 – GROUP EXERCISE

Equipped now with this practice and these examples, the students now have the task of writing their own elevator pitch for their story. Explain to them that they do not have to know where the story ends up, or how necessarily the problem is solved right now. Explain too that this is not a legally binding elevator pitch – they can tweak, change or mess around it later, but it's important to put down a first draft at this stage that they can iterate on.

While students are working on their pitches, feel free to visit each group and discuss their process, offer hints and tips, and encourage conversation between the students.

2.5 – CLASS EXERCISE

One key aspect of these lesson plans is forging a connection between what the students are doing and what professional writers do every day. Collaboration and critique is an essential part of writing, and while it can take a little bit of work and effort to create a culture of healthy critique in a classroom, it is really useful for students to have that language available to them.

Depending on your class's temperament, you can lean more or less into this aspect, by having the students present on each aspect of their treatment, and the other students give feedback.

Try having each group take to the top of the room and read out their pitch, and then take questions on it from you and the other students.

Tell the presenting group that questions are just a way for the audience to show interest. It's perfectly fine to say 'I don't know' in answer to a question. The presenting group are not being tested on their knowledge – they are in fact

learning what audiences might be interested in and can expand their story accordingly.

Teachers should take part in this process, leading by example with some basic questions like those below.

1. How do you think the character will change by fixing this problem?
2. Will the setting influence the problem or the person?
3. Why did you choose this problem/place/person?

It's important to respond with enthusiasm to even the most unformed ideas, while also asking them some leading questions that might help them put a shape on their ideas. Pitch yourself as someone so excited about their idea, you're just dying to hear more. This works so much better than telling the students they have left out information or have only delivered something piecemeal.

With a first draft of their pitch complete, students can then move onto the process of deciding on tone and palette for their story going forward.