

ELI5 in job applications

In all the countless job interviews and interview training sessions I have conducted over the past 25 years, there was exactly one occasion when I was left speechless. My client – a communication specialist – conducted the conversation so confidently that there was simply nothing left for me to criticise or improve. When he saw the look of astonishment on my face, he burst out laughing.

Peter Näf
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He told his success stories in such a way that they were effortless to understand – almost as if they had been explained to a child. That is precisely one of the most powerful principles of communication: ELI5 – Explain like I'm 5.

For a moment, I feared I might have lost my critical judgement. In my experience, even very good communicators usually still have something they can refine. Not in his case. So, I asked him what his secret was.

In our previous session, I had practised storytelling with him – after overcoming my initial hesitation about introducing such a well-known concept to a communication specialist. Of course, he was familiar with storytelling; what was new to him, however, was its consistent application in self-marketing.

Don't stop at the first draft

He told me that the concept had made immediate sense to him. At home, he wrote down his first story – not in bullet points, but as a complete text. Yet this version was by no means finished. After all, he said, he would never give his CEO the first draft of a speech as the final version.

So, he kept working on it: cutting what was

unimportant, adding what really mattered, revising the structure several times. His goal was always to give the audience exactly the information they needed at precisely the right moment to understand the story. To check this, he repeatedly read his story aloud and systematically corrected any linguistic stumbling blocks.

Learn from the communication professional

His account was a relief to me. For a long time, I had seen it as a personal shortcoming that I needed to prepare lectures or seminars very carefully. Yet through working with other communication specialists, I learned this: no one prepares communication more thoroughly than professionals.

That this principle applies far beyond job applications became clear to me when I worked with an investment specialist during an outplacement programme. He told interesting but highly complex stories that were difficult for me to follow. I asked him to explain his story in a way that I, as a complete layperson, could understand. He shook his head, smiled, and said: "How could I have overlooked that? I always tell my staff to apply ELI5 in their communication – and now, when it comes to myself, I forgot all about it."

Explain like I'm 5. Tell it so that even a five-year-old would understand it. That is exactly the principle we adults should follow if we want to be understood. And it was precisely this principle that checkmated me back then.

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