



Six Tips Towards Writing an Effective Teaching Statement

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Teaching is a major component of almost all faculty positions. Surprisingly, then, even an almost complete lack of experience and training—in teaching and student learning—will probably not prove to be a major obstacle to your obtaining a faculty position. Many institutions, particularly research-intensive universities, typically do not require candidates to provide any evidence of teaching expertise or even knowledge of how people learn. However, it is almost certain that you will be asked to write a teaching philosophy statement as part of your application package. If you

have never done this before it can be quite daunting, but fortunately a quick Internet search will provide plenty of resources and examples. These sources provide very specific advice. For example: You should consider why you want to teach, what methods you will use to teach, in what circumstances you will be teaching, and how you will know when your students have learned.

My aim for this article is not to tell you exactly how to write a teaching statement—but rather to point out some specific dos and don'ts that might help you stand out from the crowd. Remember

that the review committee will have a large number of application packages to read, and you want yours to stay in the active pile.

Six Tips to Help You Stand Out

1. *Write a teaching statement!* This may seem obvious, but if a teaching statement is asked for, you better write one. Strangely, some applicants omit this part of the package, or give it short shrift—perhaps giving it a cursory nod. Be assured, if the committee asked for a teaching statement, they will expect to see one. A teaching statement reflects how you think about what will be one of the most important aspects of your new position. Even if you have minimal experience with teaching, you certainly have been taught, so you are in a position to reflect on what worked for you, what didn't, and conclusions from your own experiences. If you get an interview, your work on this statement will serve you well, providing a basis for developing clear ideas about teaching. As a side product—it may even benefit your future students!

2. *Write it yourself!* Even though you may not have thought seriously about teaching before, don't be tempted to "adopt" a teaching philosophy you find elsewhere. Besides being ethically problematic, if you submit a flowery, overblown teaching statement that has no connection to your own experience or reflection, it will come across as false. In addition, if your teaching statement is dramatically different from the writing style of your research plans or other documents in the application packet, the review committee will notice.

By contrast, a weak, pro forma statement that you "care about students" is not likely to impress. Spend some time on serious reflection. This is your teaching statement. Give yourself the time to actually compose your thoughts. When you are finished, edit it. Poorly written and ill-thought-out statements are not likely to get you to an interview, no matter how brilliant your research plans or accomplishments.

3. *Target your teaching philosophy to the institution and position where you are applying.* While your overall philosophy might remain the same, if you are applying for a tenure-track position at a research-intensive university where class sizes number in the hundreds, you will need to be realistic about what you can do. For example: You will not be able to meet with each student individually. A research-intensive, graduate student- and postdoc-centric institution will appreciate knowing how you will approach this type of educational situation. On the other hand, when applying to a primarily undergraduate institution, where student-faculty interactions are their bread and butter, you would be wise to acknowledge that fact. Customize teaching statements for each institution—application review committees will notice if you are out of touch with their mission.

4. *Consider what classes you would like to teach, and recognize that you might be asked to teach classes that are out of your "comfort zone."* Different institutions have differing class sizes. Classes may be large and small; consider the mechanisms you might use to help people learn in both contexts. Again, this is going to depend to some extent on the type of institution you are applying to. Some published advice will recommend thinking

about the teaching and learning circumstances that worked for you. But take note: This is a perilous approach. Most students are not aiming for a Ph.D. in chemistry and frankly may not respond well to approaches aimed at the best, most motivated students in the class (i.e., people like you). You should explicitly acknowledge these differences and indicate your openness to the alternative approaches and techniques needed to reach a broad range of students. It will be your job to teach the students and you may not have exactly the students you want!

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5. *Participate in workshops and courses for faculty candidates.* If you have the opportunity, take advantage of the fact that many institutions offer workshops or courses to help you prepare for life in the professoriate; they can also help with writing academic application documents, such as your teaching statement. There may also be the opportunity to participate in a workshop that is held outside of your campus. For example, prior to every fall national meeting ACS offers the Postdoc to Faculty workshop, which helps postdocs transition to academic careers. These types of workshops and courses provide an opportunity to reflect on and discuss your ideas with others and can really help you formulate and clarify your ideas about teaching and learning. More to the point, taking part in such opportunities provides evidence for a sincere commitment to effective teaching.

6. *Keep it focused and short:* between one and two pages is appropriate. Remember that the search committee will possibly be reading hundreds of teaching statements. Your readers will not be inclined to look favorably on a long, meandering discourse about your epistemological framework or on an exposition of why you care so much about students, particularly if you have never seriously engaged in teaching before. Write your teaching philosophy statement in clear language and make your points succinctly.



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