Writing a Teaching Statement

Academic Job Search Series

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www.gradschool.cornell.edu/academic-series
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...We are seeking a broadly trained cell biologist who will complement the existing teaching and research strengths of our Department... Applicant will be expected to teach upper-level courses in cell biology, developmental biology, and to contribute to the teaching of introductory biology courses... Candidates should demonstrate evidence of excellence in teaching and mentoring undergraduates...

Interested candidates should submit the following documents:

• CV that highlights relevant teaching experience
• Cover letter that addresses the candidate's interest in working at a primarily teaching institution
• Statement of teaching philosophy, experience, and interests that includes evidence of teaching excellence...

https://chroniclevitae.com/jobs/0000908007-01
What kinds of things might you include/discuss in this teaching statement?

- Courses you have developed or TA’d
- Courses that you are qualified to teach
- Ideas on how to structure the courses they expect applicants to teach
- Experience mentoring undergraduates, summer REU students
- How you approach assessment/collect evidence of student learning
- Feedback from teaching evaluations
What should you definitely not do?

• Don’t mention your lack of teaching experience or gaps in your skillset. Be positive only in this statement
• Don’t make unsubstantiated claims
• Don’t use lots of jargon (whether teaching or research)
• Don’t actually get too philosophical about teaching
• Don’t use the wrong school’s name
• Don’t plagiarize
We need to first understand the context in which a teaching statement is reviewed.
What is a teaching statement for?

• Included as part of your job application (Later, used in annual performance reviews, or review for tenure)
  – Possibly examined later in the application process than your CV and cover letter
• An opportunity to expand in some depth on experiences that you summarized in a single line on your CV or cover letter
• Serves as a writing sample, which will be read by the search committee (and your future colleagues)
Context: Landscape of Higher Education

• Tight job market, increasing number of adjunct/contingent faculty positions
• Stay away from language such as “calling”, “passion”, “vocation” that might seem naïve or unrealistic
• Search committees are reading a lot of applications, and you need to be straightforward, clear, not trite

Credit: Karen Kelsky, *The Professor Is In*
What should you discuss, primarily?

• The WHAT
  – What you have taught, what you are prepared to teach

• The HOW
  – Show/describe you approach teaching

• A little on the WHY you teach in a certain way is okay, but…
Focus on Facts, Not Emotions

- Appeal to logic and present evidence using careful argumentation
- Focus on accomplishments, finished work (classes taught), outcomes
  - At early stages, you might not have much
- Show, don’t just tell (give examples)
- Avoid words like “passionate”, “thrilled”, and be careful/sparing with “believe”
- Do not start with ancient history or yourself as a student (meaningful teachers you had)
Tips for getting started

Credit: Shoshanna Cole, Cornell PhD, 2015

• Look at the list of courses in the ad, or offered by the department. Describe which courses you’re qualified to teach.

• If you’ve taught the equivalent of any of the courses already, write a paragraph about it. Say what you did with the class (especially if it was innovative), what went well, how you assessed your students’ learning, how you assessed the effectiveness of your teaching.
Tips for getting started

Credit: Shoshanna Cole, Cornell PhD, 2015

• Consider: What skills do you want your students to develop? Some of these may be directly related to your discipline (e.g., proper lab techniques), and others general (e.g., critical thinking skills)

• Think about what kinds of classes you would like to teach, and why. Introductory classes, where you can give potential majors their first taste of your field? Advanced courses for students who want to go on to graduate school? General education courses, where you can cultivate literate citizens?
Tips for getting started

Credit: Shoshanna Cole, Cornell PhD, 2015

• Think about: What mentoring have you done? How did you guide your mentees? What did you find satisfying about that experience?
• How would you approach mentoring students at a different stage? (or different types of individuals)
Karen Kelsky’s Four-Paragraph Template

1. Brief, overarching goals and description of your pedagogy
2. Specific courses you’ve taught and methods you’ve used. (Not in a chronological order.)
3. More of the same on a different theme (different teaching method – e.g., online, different course material, different student audience). Or, expand on assessment.
4. Wrap up on hopes for what your students get out of your courses, moving forward.

Specific Considerations

- **Course Design**
  - *What is the best use of in- and out-of-class time to support the desired learning outcomes?*

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Castle top template after Dee Fink’s “Self-Directed Guide for Designing Courses for Significant Learning”:

Specific Considerations

• Assessment of Student Learning

Formative Assessment:
Low stakes, gather feedback, track progress

Summative Assessment:
High stakes, evaluate learning against a standard

www.unf.edu/ofe/teaching_learning/Assessment.aspx
“As an instructor, the blog also provided weekly opportunities for me to assess (rather than formally evaluate) the students’ interests, overall learning progress, and questions regarding the readings…….

“Together with more formal evaluative assignments (short and long papers, presentations, and quizzes), these feedback opportunities provide me with critical access to my students’ thinking and the scope of their learning.”

Author: Laura Ambrose
Source: http://www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/Ambrose.pdf
Specific Considerations: Inclusive Teaching for a Diverse Student Body

Consider the *Modes of Interaction*

Credit: Don Gillian-Daniel, University of Wisconsin-Madison (Moore, 1989; Anderson & Garrison, 1998)

**Learner-Content Interactions**
- how participants experience content;
- how content can be adapted and varied

**Learner-Instructor Interactions**
- respectful teaching behaviors;
- accessibility for all participants…

**Learner-Learner Interactions**
- Setting the tone for respectful inclusion in collaborative work;
- respect for the ideas of all and recognition of their value

www.cirrl.net/diversityresources
What if you don’t have much teaching experience?

• First, address the courses that you’d be qualified to teach. This should be tailored to the institution to which you’re applying – read through the department website or the institution’s course catalog.

• If you’re not applying to a particular school yet, look at an appropriate department at the type of institution where you’d like to teach.
What if you don’t have much teaching experience?

• Think back to when you took (or TA’ed) the equivalent of some of these courses. Were there any assignments, lessons, or teaching methods that you found particularly effective (or particularly ineffective)? Is there anything that you’d emulate? What would you change?

• CAUTION: You do **not** want to be portraying yourself as a student, so make sure all your actual statements in the document portray yourself as a (future) instructor. “I find…”
What if you don’t have much teaching experience?

• Describe how you would teach a particular course in general terms.
  – How would you design the course?
  – Would you incorporate themes to connect different topics throughout the course?
  – What sorts of assignments would you require?
  – What skills would you want your students to develop through the course?
“When teaching ______ course, I [would] use a project-based method and design the course around [assignment examples].

“Students work on this over the course of the semester, doing things like ______, _______, and ________, which addresses ______ learning outcomes or builds ______ skills.”

Credit: Shoshanna Cole, Cornell PhD, 2015
Some tools for reflection on your beliefs
Teaching Perspectives Inventory

www.teachingperspectives.com/tpi/
Word Clouds

• Put draft statements through word cloud generators to get a quick overview
• Identify key words that correctly represent your philosophy or personal theory of teaching

• Resources:
  – http://www.wordle.net/create
  – http://www.tagxedo.com
Statement of Siddarth Chandrasekaran, Cornell PhD Student, Chemistry
Siddarth Chandrasekaran and David Way, Cornell University - Goals for Teaching Statement

1) Answering the ‘*WHY*’
   - Laying out clearly the learning outcomes for the class.

2) Addressing the ‘*HOW*’
   - Explicitly expressing the expectations of the class in terms of learning strategies and grading/assessment schemes.

3) Action: Doing the ‘how’ and ‘why’
   - Engaging the students in the learning process ‘actively’

4) Assessment: Grading the students
   - Providing students feedback on how much progress they are making towards attaining the learning objectives

5) Advancement: Considering the student needs and evaluating teaching methods
   - Obtain student reviews on the course (midterm and final reviews) and use them to address the student needs
   - Look into how many learning objectives have been met by students, and use that information to modify future courses.
   - Development and incorporation of different learning strategies, such as peer learning, grid based learning and low stakes writing to aid student learning
Resources

• University of Minnesota – A step-by-step guide to writing a teaching philosophy statement:
http://cei.umn.edu/support-services/tutorials/writing-teaching-philosophy

• Cornell University Graduate School
http://www.gradschool.cornell.edu/career-services/teaching-philosophy-statement

• Vitae, Chronicle of Higher Education, 2015 – How to Write a Teaching Statement that Sings
https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1114-how-to-write-a-teaching-statement-that-sings

• ALS 6015 - The Practice of Teaching in Higher Education (Prof. David Way, dgw2@cornell.edu)
Exercise: Write and Share – Core Philosophy

Write/discuss ideas, and then share with neighbors.

(These notes are for your own use/reflection, not to quote verbatim in a statement - for the reasons that we already discussed)

• What is a teacher’s role in the classroom?
  Ex: Coach, Mentor, Lecturer, Entertainer, Drill Sergeant, etc…

• What are the important qualities of a great teacher?
  Ex: Style of lecturing, Knowledge, Passion, Organization, Attitude, etc…

• How do students learn best in my discipline/field?
  Ex: Memorization, Practice, Labs, Action, etc…
More Questions to Consider

• Is there anything that you [would] do in your classroom that sets you apart from most people in your field?

• How do you assess your students’ learning?

• How do you assess your effectiveness as a teacher?
Questions/Concerns?
Other Resources?
Seriously, don’t plagiarize.