

WRITING YOUR TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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Writing a teaching philosophy statement can be a strange and intimidating exercise for many academics who are well-trained in writing scholarly articles about research, but less accustomed to writing personal narratives *or* writing about teaching. Nevertheless, requests for teaching philosophies are becoming more and more frequent in the academic market and amongst tenure and promotion committees (Bruff 2007; Kaplan et al 2008; Meizlish & Kaplan 2008; Schönwetter, Taylor, & Ellis 2006); in fact, one survey of over 400 search committee chairs from multiple disciplines found that 57% requested a teaching statement during the job search process (Kaplan et al, 2008). The task can feel even more complicated for freshly-minted Ph.D.'s who might have never had the opportunity to teach. This paper is designed to demystify this often-unfamiliar document, examining the purpose of a teaching philosophy statement and detailing suggested strategies and elements to consider when composing one.

What is a Teaching Philosophy, and What is its Purpose?

At its core, a teaching philosophy statement (sometimes simply called a teaching statement) is a brief, personal statement that offers insight into an instructor's beliefs about teaching and actions in the classroom. In essence, it is the "why, what, and how" of one's teaching. It is often included as part of a more comprehensive teaching portfolio, but can also stand alone as a singular document. More specifically, Nancy Chism (1998) writes, "What brings a teaching philosophy to life is the extent to which it creates a vivid portrait of how a person is intentional about teaching practices and committed to career."

The teaching statement is essentially intended to help others visualize who you are as a teacher; it stands to reason that this is the main purpose for its inclusion in job applications and tenure dossiers as well as applications for teaching awards or fellowships. The value of a teaching philosophy statement, however, extends even beyond these pragmatic and summative purposes. The very act of taking time to reflect on your teaching can help you clarify your own beliefs or reveal inconsistencies, thereby facilitating change and improvements that foster personal and professional growth (Kearns & Sullivan 2001; Kaplan et al 2008).

What to Include in a Teaching Philosophy: The Big Picture

Several have discussed how to write teaching statements and potential components for inclusion (Chism 1998; Goodyear & Allchin 1998; Kaplan et al 2008; O'Neal, Meizlish & Kaplan 2007), and most make similar suggestions. Goodyear and Allchin (1998) and Chism (1998) suggest starting with "big" questions of teaching to help you begin to articulate your personal philosophy, for instance, and more recent research from Kaplan et al (2008) offers ideas about more specific components that hiring committees seek. What follows here is an overview of some suggested components regarding content

of a teaching philosophy statement; however, keep in mind that there is no hard-and-fast formula for the perfect statement! Furthermore, you should not feel compelled to include *every single* component listed below. Just getting started can be overwhelming, and every teaching statement should be a unique and personal reflection of the individual.

- **Conceptualization of learning.** You might consider addressing what learning means to you, or how you think learning happens. Even if you have not studied the literature on teaching and learning – *and it is perfectly ok if you haven't!* – you might reflect on your own experiences in the classroom, or in particular situations, to help you clarify and articulate this conceptualization. Chism (1998) even suggests approaching this task through metaphor to aid with the process. Perhaps the easiest way to approach this task is to think about how you would complete the following sentence: *I believe students learn best by/when/who...*
- **Conceptualization of teaching.** Perhaps naturally it follows that you might also want to address how you conceptualize teaching – what do you think it means “to teach,” and how you believe you facilitate the learning process as a “teacher.” To help you determine your view on teaching, you might finish the statement, *“I believe the role of the teacher is...”* Again, this could be metaphorical, or you might reflect on what you believe an instructor’s responsibility is towards his or her students in terms of motivation, content, support, etc.
- **Goals for students.** Addressing your goals for your students is perhaps one of the most important components you can include in your teaching statement, because they are tangible ideas that can communicate a great deal about what is important to you as a teacher. What skills or knowledge do you want your students to gain from your class? The goals you choose to address can be more than simply learning a given course content or discipline-specific knowledge; you can discuss other skills as well, such as general process or cross-disciplinary skills, or even life-long learning goals such as critical thinking, problem solving, ethics, social commitment, or self-confidence. The sky is the limit! Equally important when discussing your goals is to discuss *why you maintain these goals* and *how you work to help your students to accomplish those goals*.
- **Implementation of the philosophy.** Chism (1998) also recommends that teaching statements include a description of how one’s beliefs about teaching are “translated into action” (p.2). This is another crucial component of the philosophy statement because without showing your philosophy in action or details of how you translate that philosophy into classroom activities, your statements could be perceived as empty or perfunctory. Just as any scholarly article requires evidence to support assertions, so must you support your teaching philosophy. It is worth keeping in mind that the details and examples you provide are what will create that “vivid picture” of your teaching for those who don’t know you, and should provide insight into what happens in your classroom on a *day-to-day basis* rather than flashy, one-time activities that are interesting but not truly representative of your daily teaching. In fact, Kaplan et al (2008) and Bruff (2007) found that specificity and offering evidence of practice was undoubtedly the most commonly cited trait of successful teaching statements.
- **Evaluation or assessment of goals.** Kaplan et al (2008) suggest including a discussion of assessment in teaching statements to help show alignment with goals and teaching methods. Given the current emphasis on meaningful assessment in higher education, it should make sense that assessment would be an important component of a philosophy of teaching and

would be of great interest to hiring, tenure, and promotion committees. Ultimately, you simply need to address how you know students are meeting the goals that you set forth. You could discuss both formal and informal assessment methods, such as how you design tests or why you assign certain essays, or even ungraded, in-class activities.

- **Inclusive learning.** Kaplan et al (2008) also recommend mentioning efforts toward creating an inclusive learning environment or accounting for diversity in the classroom, and indeed, the literature shows that hiring committees were particularly interested in teaching statements that conveyed a sense of student-centeredness and described an instructor who is attuned to differences in student ability, learning styles, or level (Bruff 2007; Kaplan et al 2008). Again, diversity and inclusion are likewise hot-button issues in higher education today, so these issues might warrant a mention for several reasons. To accomplish this you need not be well-versed in research on learning preferences; instead, you might simply consider the different ways you might teach majors vs. non-majors, traditional vs. non-traditional students, or even introverts and extroverts, to name just a few.

Some Do's and Don'ts: Fine-Tuning your Statement

While the “big picture” content of your teaching statement is paramount, it is likewise important to consider how you present that information. Here are a few stylistic “do’s and don’ts” to consider as you draft your statement.

- **Use present tense.** A common question among first-time writers of teaching philosophy statements has to do with format. While there is no standard format for such statements, most (Chism 1998; Schönwetter et al 2002) generally recommend that your teaching philosophy should employ a **first-person** (e.g., “I,” not “You,” “Teachers,” or “He/She”), **present tense** point of view (e.g., “teach” not “taught”). This approach accommodates a variety of disciplines and is easiest to read, and furthermore communicates that your teaching is personal and ongoing, rather than impersonal, stagnant, or inflexible.
- **Keep it brief.** Many institutions or committees might offer a recommended page length, and if they do, be sure to adhere to it! However, if no length is suggested, it is wise to keep your statement brief so as not to overwhelm your readers (Chism 1998; Montell 2003; Schönwetter et al 2002). **One to two pages** is the generally accepted length. However, Schönwetter et al (2002) assert that there is a growing trend in the hiring process requesting teaching philosophy statements as stand-alone indicators of teaching achievement, and as such, they contend that two pages might not be sufficient. This is a fair point, and you should use your own best judgment to determine an appropriate length, but when in doubt, a briefer statement is likely going to be more effective.
- **Know your audience.** As with any piece of writing or presentation, it is vital to keep in mind the needs and values of those who will be reading your statement – especially if you are on the job market. Be aware that

GETTING STARTED

Think about teachers you have liked and why you liked them.

Think about teachers you have *not* liked and why you didn't like them.

Think about why teaching is important to you and what you enjoy about it.

Think about teaching and learning metaphorically.

different institutions will have differing missions and expectations, particularly regarding the role of teaching (Montell 2003). Consider the differences, for instance, between a large, state-funded institution and a small religious institution or community college. Do some research and learn about the institution's mission, policies, classes, and faculty members. One caveat: this is not rationale for lying in your statement to pander to a given audience, because even if you are desperate for an academic position, you probably do not want to work at an institution that will be a poor fit for your style and philosophy. Rather, consider minor changes to your statement that might detail how you adjust your teaching style to that audience and situation. For example, how would you teach a large class, or how do you integrate your research into your teaching?

- **"Own" your statements.** Remember that your teaching philosophy is just that – *yours*. It details your personal beliefs about teaching and your actions in the classroom, and those beliefs may or may not belong to others – especially those experienced faculty members who will likely be reading your statement at some point. This awareness should be reflected in the language you use in your statement. In other words, don't write about what "all teachers should do." Instead, write about what *you do* and what *you believe*.
- **Do not make empty statements.** While many or even most teaching statements might start with broad philosophical ideas, you must move beyond the general and anchor your statement with concrete details. Indeed, Kaplan et al (2008) report that the most common complaint from hiring committees was the use of "jargon, buzzwords, or 'teaching-philosophy speak' that made all statements sound alike and rather generic" (p. 249). Too many buzzwords with no details to support them or evidence of practice could cause your audience to doubt the sincerity of your statement.
- **Ground it in your discipline, but use language that can be broadly appreciated.** To avoid empty statements, offer some insight about teaching in your specific field. Readers should be able to pick up on your discipline through the details you provide, even if you don't write it explicitly in your statement. Conversely, even as you provide insights from your discipline, you should avoid getting bogged down with jargon and instead use language that many can understand, even if they are not specialists (Chism 1998). Readers will often come from outside your department or discipline, so you want to avoid alienating them altogether. If you are not sure who will be reading your statement, it is wise to tread the line of moderation.
- **Do not rehash your vita.** Your teaching statement is not the place for you to offer a laundry list of all the classes you have taught or other details that committees can find on your CV. Your focus should remain on what you believe about teaching and why, and how you put those beliefs into action. Resist this temptation!
- **Do not be a know-it-all.** While you may feel like you need to sound as if you know everything there is to know about teaching, the reality is that experienced faculty members realize that nobody is perfect, and good teaching is a process of trial, error, and reflection. This is especially true if you are a relatively new teacher; if you sound arrogant in your statement, you might offend or vex your more seasoned readers. Kaplan et al (2008) found that hiring committees highly valued statements that revealed a thoughtful and reflective instructor. Equally, if you are new to teaching, that does not mean you know *nothing!* Strive to strike a balance somewhere

on the continuum between knowing absolutely nothing and absolutely everything; chances are, you fall somewhere in the middle!

- **Do not condescend about your students.** While we have all undoubtedly had a bad day and have felt irritated with our students at some time, your teaching statement is not the place to discuss those feelings! Don't forget that teaching is about students, and if you are hoping to land or keep a faculty position – *which means working with students* – it behooves you to communicate some enthusiasm and passion. Again, the hiring committees in Kaplan et al's study (2008) appreciated statements that conveyed valuing of teaching, and disliked "those that conceptualized teaching as a burden, a requirement, or as less of a priority than research" (p. 248).
- **Make sure it is well written.** Finally, for all intents and purposes, your teaching statement is a writing sample of sorts that will be judged by others. If your statement is sloppy, disorganized, or incomprehensible, your readers might anticipate that you too are sloppy, disorganized, or incomprehensible. Similarly, this statement is your opportunity to communicate with those who don't know you, and if they can't understand your writing, then you are failing to communicate. Write several drafts of your statement, and recruit friends, colleagues, and mentors to offer a fresh pair of eyes and feedback to help you polish it.

A FEW SAMPLE RUBRICS FOR EVALUATION

- *Rubric for Statements of Teaching Philosophy*, developed by Matt Kaplan, Chris O'Neal, Debbie Meizlish, Rosario Carillo, & Diana Kardia. University of Michigan CRLT.
<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/onedayPFF2005/TeachingPhilosophyRubric.pdf>
- *Assessment Rubric for Teaching/Learning Philosophy*, by R. Neill Johnson. Penn State University Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence.
http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/pdf/Teaching_Philosophy_rubric_r1.pdf
- *Teaching Philosophy Rubric*. University of Iowa Center for Teaching.
<http://centeach.uiowa.edu/materials/Teaching%20Philosophy%20Rubric.pdf>
- *Also see the articles by Kearns & Sullivan (2010) and Schönwetter et al (2002).*

Conclusion

It is worth repeating that there is no single, standardized, "correct" approach to writing a teaching philosophy statement. However, the strategies and elements suggested here are supported by research and widely agreed-upon by faculty developers, hiring committees, and others with vested interest in teaching statements. The most important thing to remember is that your statement should uniquely reflect you as an individual and provide others with thoughtful and vivid insight into what you do in your classroom and why. If you would like further help in fine-tuning your teaching statement, the

professionals at the TLPDC are glad to offer individual consultations. In addition, take a look at some of the resources provided below.

Some Additional Online Resources

The following websites offer a wealth of additional resources and guidance on teaching philosophy statements, including examples of statements from both faculty and graduate students.

- The University of Hawaii Teacher Portfolio and Preparation Series. (TiPPS) Teaching philosophy. http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/tipps/?page_id=53
- The University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. Teaching strategies: The teaching philosophy/Teaching statement." <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tstpts.php>
- The Ohio State University Center for the Advancement of Teaching. Writing a philosophy of teaching statement. http://ucate.osu.edu/teaching_portfolio/philosophy/philosophy2.html

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