

# WRITING YOUR TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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Writing a teaching philosophy statement can be a challenging and intimidating exercise for many who are well-trained in writing scholarly articles about research, but perhaps less accustomed to writing personal narratives or writing about teaching. Requests for teaching philosophies are frequent in the academic market and amongst tenure and promotion committees (Bruff 2007; Kaplan et al 2008; Meizlish & Kaplan 2008; Schönwetter, Taylor, & Ellis 2006); however, teaching philosophies might range in their form from an application that requests a paragraph to a separate and more lengthy document. 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). Yet the task can feel complicated and intimidating for new Ph.D.'s on the job market who might have never had the opportunity to teach or may feel pressured to write a philosophical interpretation of their beliefs about teaching. 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 the type of classroom they would like to build. In essence, it is the "why, what, and how" of one's attitude and beliefs about 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 their career."

The teaching statement is essentially intended to help you articulate and 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 the time to reflect on your teaching can help you clarify your own beliefs, reveal inconsistencies and facilitate 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. Research from Kaplan et al (2008) offers ideas about more specific components that hiring committees may be seeking. Below is an overview of some suggested components regarding content of a teaching philosophy statement; however, do keep in mind that there is no perfect formula for the perfect statement! Furthermore, you should not feel compelled to include every single component listed below. Every teaching statement should be a unique and personal reflection of the individual and to their particular context. Again, some situations require a brief teaching statement and might only be able to reference one or two of the suggestions components below, while other circumstances might allow for more detail.

- **Conceptualization of learning.** Consider addressing what learning means to you, or how you believe 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. Perhaps the easiest way to approach this task is to think about how you would complete the following sentence: *I believe students learn best when....*
- **Conceptualization of teaching.** It stands to reason that you might also want to address how you conceptualize teaching – what do you think it means “to teach” and what do you believe about your role as the facilitator in the learning process as the “teacher”. To help you determine your view on teaching, you might finish the statement, *“I believe my role as a teacher is...”* You might take time to reflect on what you believe an instructor’s responsibilities are toward their students in terms of motivation, content, support, etc. Caukin and Brinthaupt (2017) suggest that pre-service teachers who created “I believe” statements prior to writing their teaching philosophy statements were able to use this writing tool as a scaffold to deeper thinking and reflection about their beliefs in education. It’s a great starting place!
- **Goals for students.** Addressing your goals for students is perhaps one of the most important components you can include in your teaching statement, because these can be 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, you must also 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 offering evidence based practice and specific examples were undoubtedly the most commonly cited trait of successful teaching statements. All of that said, if you have a limited amount of space in which to communicate, this may be a component that you have to omit.

- **Evaluation or assessment of goals.** Kaplan et al (2008) suggest including a discussion of assessment in teaching statement to help show alignment with goals and teaching methods. Given the longstanding 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 exams or rubrics or why you assign certain formal writing assignments or in-class reflection activities. Remember that the simple act of checking in with students and getting some informal feedback about how they are doing with a particular assignment or in the course in general is an assessment strategy!
- **Inclusive learning.** Kaplan et al (2008) also recommend mentioning efforts toward creating an inclusive learning environment and considering issues of diversity in the classroom. The literature shows that hiring committees were particularly interested in teaching statements that conveyed a sense of student-centered learning and described an instructor who is mindful of differences in student ability, learning styles and level (Bruff 2007; Kaplan et al 2008). Diversity and inclusion are important values that should be woven in our classes, but helping others understand your decision making to help students experience a sense of belongingness in your classes can be a part of creating that vivid portrait of your teaching mentioned earlier in this paper. For example, consider the different ways you might teach majors vs. non-majors, traditional vs. non-traditional students, first generation and at-risk learners, veterans, neurodivergent students and others in your classrooms.

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

While the “big picture” content of your teaching statement is paramount, it is also 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

#### GETTING STARTED

Think about teachers you have liked and what you liked about their teaching style.

Think about teachers you have *not liked* and why.

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

“taught”). This approach accommodates a variety of disciplines and is easiest to read, and further communicates that your teaching is personal and your commitment to it ongoing, rather than impersonal, stagnant, or inflexible.

- **Keep it brief.** Many institutions or committees might offer a recommended paragraph or 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* page is probably the best practice, but you can stretch to that second page if needed. You should use your own best judgment to determine an appropriate length but, when in doubt, brevity is likely going to be more effective and appreciated.
- **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 different institutions will have differing missions and expectations, particularly regarding the role of teaching (Montell 2003). Consider differences such as those between a large, state-funded institution and a small liberal arts institution or community college. It may be helpful to do some research and learn about the institution’s mission, policies, student and faculty populations. It is important to stay true to your core values and beliefs and not to be tempted to change your philosophy in an effort to appeal to a certain 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.
- **“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. 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 even 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 of study. 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. It may be wise to keep things general and avoid getting bogged down with discipline related jargon and instead use language that many can

understand, even if they are work is outside your area of expertise (Chism 1998). Readers from outside your department or discipline are often a part of your audience, and being mindful of this can be helpful. 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 the temptation to duplicate information.
- ***Do communicate the desire to keep learning and growing.*** While you may feel like you need to sound as if you know everything there is to know about teaching, the reality is that even experienced faculty members realize that nobody is perfect, and that good teaching is a process of trial, error, reflection and commitment to continued growth and development. This is especially true if you are a relatively new teacher; if you sound arrogant in your statement, this may be off putting to 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 communicate positivity, value and respect for 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 negative feelings! Don't forget that teaching is about students, and if you are hoping to land or advance in a faculty position, you will be working with students—it behooves you let your enthusiasm and passion for student success shine through. 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 reviewed by others and it reflects your writing skills and professional voice. If your statement is sloppy, disorganized or contains multiple errors, your readers might have concerns about your level of preparation and professionalism. Similarly, this statement is your opportunity to communicate with those who don't yet know you, and a chance to put your best foot forward. 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. Consider taking advantage of the services offered by the [Texas Tech Writing Centers](#) to get feedback.
- ***Consider the format.*** In the past, teaching philosophy statements were often crafted as hard-copy documents, but this has evolved and your opportunities represent your philosophy through technology are endless. Perhaps a simple text-based version of your philosophy statement can be easily copied and pasted into an application or included in a broader teaching portfolio. But as Alexander et al (2012) suggest, other alternatives such as slideshow

presentations, electronic portfolios, websites, images, or even digital stories may be a way to rethink the genre of teaching philosophy statements and emphasize their nature as living documents.

#### 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.  
[https://crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource\\_files/CRLT\\_no23Revised\\_Rubric.pdf](https://crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/CRLT_no23Revised_Rubric.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](http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/pdf/Teaching_Philosophy_rubric_r1.pdf)

### 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 interests in this topic. The most important thing to remember is that your statement should uniquely reflect who you are as an individual and provide others with insight into what you believe about the teaching and learning process and why you believe it.

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