Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy for the Academic Job Market

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a teaching philosophy statement?
A 1-2 page single-spaced narrative that explains your teaching strategies and goals and grounds them in the context of positions you have held and seek to hold. Despite its conventional title as a “philosophy,” the statement is less of a conceptual or theoretical essay and more of a narrative about your teaching. A statement covers issues such as the intellectual and creative skills and knowledge you aim to enable your students to achieve in the context of your discipline, how you see your role and interact with students, how you organize class time, how you address the challenges in teaching in your discipline then obtain and respond to feedback from your students. Notice that these elements foreground you and your students, rather than disciplinary complexities or the course material in itself. Thus, think about verbs and adverbs that potently describe what you and your students are doing interactively in your engagements with each other and intellectually with the course material. Written in the first person, your statement describes what techniques work for you and your students and doesn’t strive to persuade readers, who may have a lot of teaching experience and their own philosophies, how they should be teaching. A good metaphor or vignette might make a good literary opening, as much as stating the larger payoffs of your discipline for your students as citizens, but remember that a convincing scholarly paper also asserts ideas and explanations with supporting examples and evidence.

2. What are search committees looking for in a teaching statement?
Recent research* conducted with over 350 search committee chairs at a number of our peer research universities shows that they highly value the following qualities (in their order of importance): Evidence of teaching practice (that is, specific examples of teaching techniques and interactions); they focus on what students are doing and learning and consider differences in their ability and learning styles; they reflect how instructors see their own role in their students’ learning and modify their teaching to address challenges; they describe how teaching connects with their academic career; and they are clear and jargon-free.

3. So should I read the literature on pedagogy to prepare my statement?
The literature on teaching and learning in higher education is a large treasure to be discovered that ranges from personal essays on effective teaching activities to empirical research and theories about how students and instructors learn and teach effectively. While it isn’t necessary to learn this literature to write your statement, it couldn’t hurt to start looking at it. But be careful about over-using abstract and inaccessible terms. Explanations of specific examples from your teaching would be more valuable than an abstract essay in the third-person. In the same way, avoid boilerplate language or such as “I want to teach my students to think critically,” without defining what critical thinking means in your discipline and explaining how your students get practice at it. The McGraw Teaching & Learning Center staff holds workshops and runs a website to translate pedagogical research and literature into accessible discussions and practices for you and to help you to adapt it into your discipline and teaching assignments.
4. How should I get started on writing my statement? Where do I start?
Many find that a teaching statement is difficult to write, perhaps because our teaching strategies and assumptions about teaching and learning are implicit. Writing a teaching statement, then, is an excellent vehicle that can help you to reveal and reflect on your own teaching as well as to enhance it. Here are two approaches to begin writing your statement: One is by defining the overall goal of your teaching in your discipline in terms of your students’ learning (e.g. “My students learn to....”) and then deduce from that how your specific course format and interactions enable your students to reach that goal. Another approach is the converse: Start writing by describing how you run your classes, that is, what you and your students do, and then work inductively to identify what your students are learning to do and know through those engagements. Are your practices and goals aligned? How do you assess if your students are making progress towards the goals? Even before writing your statement it is a good idea to spend at least 15 minutes after class each week while you are teaching to reflect on what worked and what didn’t and to sketch goals and plans for repeating or revising specific teaching practices. A teaching journal not only provides field notes to enhance your teaching, it lays the groundwork for writing your statement!

5. I don’t think I’ve had a lot of teaching experience as a graduate student at Princeton, especially compared to graduate students elsewhere, in order to write a thorough statement. I have not designed and taught my own course, for example, and I have been a preceptor (AI) for just a few semesters. Can I use my limited work experience to write a good statement?
Yes! A statement that vividly describes key moments from even one semester and reflects on them thoughtfully using ideas here can provide insight into how you define your role as an instructor and carry out your teaching.

6. Should I send an unsolicited teaching statement with my cover letter, CV and initial application materials?
Recent research on the circulation and criteria of teaching statements* research universities shows that unsolicited statements do not necessarily hurt a candidate’s application although search committees do view them more favorably at further stages in the search process. If you understand that excellent teaching is crucial for success in a tenure-track faculty position, then a thoughtful unsolicited statement may be read positively; in other contexts, an unsolicited statement could unintentionally send a message that research and scholarship are not your priority at a school where it effectively is. Beyond the statement, it might be best to wait to send additional materials such as student evaluations from your classes when they are requested specifically, or as part of a request for teaching materials or a portfolio.

7. Does The McGraw Center have some examples of teaching statements that I could look at?
The McGraw Center does not currently collect graduate student teaching statements for review. Our goal is to give you the research, concepts and criteria to read and evaluate the many examples of teaching statements that can be found by using your favorite internet search tool to easily find examples of actual teaching statements on the web. Consider the criteria identified here as a rubric and rank statements (including your own) on a 5 point scale.