

How to Write a Teaching Statement That Sings

Almost everybody has to craft one; almost nobody knows how.
Here's a guide that'll get you started.



Vitae

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The Basics: How to Write a Teaching Statement

Boiling your views on pedagogy down to two pages might seem daunting. But don't fear: You can make it work.

By Gabriela Montell

You've polished your CV and cover letter and lined up your letters of recommendation. Your application for a faculty position is ready, with one big exception: You're still struggling to write a statement of your teaching philosophy.

The task is daunting — even for the most experienced Ph.D.'s — but it's increasingly difficult to avoid, as a growing number of departments are requiring applicants to submit such statements in their job applications. We talked to dozens of professors and administrators to learn what they look for when they read a statement of teaching philosophy, and we assembled their advice on getting started and avoiding some costly mistakes. Here are their tips and a list of dos and don'ts:

Getting Started

"Do I even have a teaching philosophy?" you may ask yourself.

Of course you do, says Matt Kaplan, associate director of the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan. Every doctoral graduate has a teaching philosophy, whether or not they realize it. Let's face it, you may not be the most experienced instructor, but "you've been a student for a long time, and you've been in all types of classes, so you have opinions about teaching and learning and what works and doesn't work," he says.

If you don't have a lot of teaching experience, "think about the great teachers you've had and what made them so effective, what they did that inspired you to spend six years in graduate school at a cost of \$1,000 a month," says Andrew Green, a Ph.D. counselor in the Career Center at the University of California at Berkeley.

If you're still feeling overwhelmed by the task at hand, try to focus on concrete questions, as opposed to the abstract question of "What's my philosophy?" says Mr. Kaplan.

"Breaking down that broad question into component parts — for example, What do you believe about teaching? What do you believe about learning? Why? How is that played out in

your classroom? How does student identity and background make a difference in how you teach? What do you still struggle with in terms of teaching and student learning? — is often easier," he says. "Those more concrete questions get you thinking, and then you can decide what you want to expand on. Another useful tip is to think about what you don't like in a teacher, says Cynthia Petrites, assistant director for graduate services for the humanities in the Career and Placement Services office at the University of Chicago. "Reflecting on what you don't like can give you insights about what you do like," and that can help you to define your own teaching philosophy and goals, she says.

Do Some Research

"Different institutions have different expectations, depending on their mission and how they view the role of teaching within the broader responsibilities of being a faculty member," says Mr. Green.

Does the college have a religious mission? Does it have an environmental mission? If so, you'd better address the mission in your statement, he says. While your teaching philosophy may stay the same, your teaching style may vary depending on your audience. So if you're applying to various types of institutions — evangelical colleges, community colleges, liberal-arts colleges, and state universities — you may need to write several different statements, Mr. Green says.

Before you start writing, look closely at the job ad and the institution's Web site. Look to see if the teaching philosophies of the faculty members are on the site. Find out how large the institution is and what the institution values.

You need to know about class size and what kinds of students you'll be teaching, so you'll know what to stress in your statement, because above all, the search committee will be looking to see if you understand what's expected of you at their institution, says Brian Wilson, chairman of the department of comparative religion at Western Michigan University. "You don't want to pitch large auditorium classes to a liber-

al-arts college, because they don't do that. That's not their style. Their mission is to give personal service to students. Whereas here at Western, we've got 35,000 students. We're a school that offers education to a wide variety of people, and we have large classes, so if you have experience teaching large classes, that's important and would be essential to put into a teaching statement."

Don't Rehash Your Vita

A teaching philosophy isn't a laundry list of what you've done, says Mr. Green. "I've read a lot of first drafts that were simply recitations of students' past teaching history — 'I've had six semesters as a teaching assistant at Berkeley and I've taught Introduction to Comparative Politics twice.' Well, you know, maybe you taught them all poorly. How do I know, unless you tell me what you learned as a teaching assistant about effective teaching and how you're going to implement it?"

The first rule of thumb is "to focus not so much on what courses you've taught, but on how it is you go about teaching," he says. "Don't make the mistake of recapitulating what's already in your CV."

Don't Make Empty Statements

Good statements and bad statements frequently start the same (with a broad philosophical declaration), but good ones anchor the general in something concrete (in an example that one can visualize), Ms. Petrites says. Anyone can talk about teaching in an idyllic sense; you need to give examples.

"If you say you work to encourage collaboration in the classroom, then explain how you do that, or if you're a new teacher, how you would do that," she says. "It's easy to say, 'I want to encourage collaboration in the classroom,' or 'I want to get students to think more critically' and leave it at that. But who doesn't want to do that?"

Empty statements are a dime a dozen, says David Haney, chairman of the English department at Appalachian State University. "Ninety percent of the statements I see include the sentence, 'I run a student-centered classroom.' My response to that is, 'Duh. If you don't, there's something wrong with you.' Do not ever use that phrase, unless you plan to follow it up with what kinds of things you have students do, what specific teaching techniques you've found successful. Otherwise it sounds like you're just saying what you think I want to hear."

Keep It Short

If there's a page limit, stick to it. "If they say they want one to two pages, don't give them five pages," says Mr. Haney. You may have a lot to say, but you don't want to overwhelm the search committee.

Stay Grounded in Your Discipline

One way to avoid becoming mired in generalities is to share some insights about teaching in your particular field, Mr. Haney says. For example, if you're applying for a job in an English department teaching literature courses, you might talk about why you think it's important for students to read literature and how you plan to teach them to interpret it, he says. Describing your theoretical approach and/or what kinds of exercises you assign students will make your statement more engaging.

Make Sure It's Well-Written

"Like everything else in your application, it's a writing sample," so make sure your statement is well-written, Mr. Haney says. "It's a chance for you to demonstrate how articulate you are. Hiring committees, especially in English and the humanities, are going to look very closely at your writing."

Adopt a Tone of Humility

Be careful not to sound as if you know all there is to know about teaching, warns Bill Pannacker, an assistant professor of English at Hope College. Most applicants believe they won't be hired unless they already know everything, so "they tend to glorify their successes and present a picture of seamless perfection, which is unbelievable. I feel alienated from them because I can't imagine myself being as perfect, even after years of experience, as they present themselves as being with only a few years of experience. It's pretty presumptuous, if you ask me."

Good teaching comes from years of trial and error, so a little humility is in order. "I'd rather read statements from candidates who talk about their mistakes and go on from there to describe how they learned from them to become better teachers," says Mr. Pannacker.

Applicants also would be wise to avoid using superlatives, unless they want to sound arrogant. "It's much better to say, 'My student evaluations are consistently high' than to say 'My students say I'm the best teacher they've ever had,'" says Gene C. Fant Jr., chairman of the English department at Union University. And don't use Latin quotations, he adds. "A lot of the statements I've seen start off with Latin, and to me, that's just pompous. We already have enough pompous people in higher education. We don't need them in our own department."

Remember: It's About the Students

New teachers often devote their statements to showing that they can be innovative or that they can incorporate so-

p sophisticated concepts in a classroom, but they seldom mention how students reacted to those innovations and concepts, says Ms. Petrites of Chicago. “It’s important to present a picture of yourself in a classroom with students. Otherwise readers may ask, ‘Was this all about you or the students?’”

When you mention your students, be sure to convey enthusiasm toward them rather than condescension, says Mary Cullinan, dean of arts and sciences at California State University-Stanislaus. “Writers of teaching statements may come across as exasperated with students if they talk about how flawed the students are, how their writing skills aren’t as good as they should be, or how they don’t attend class the way they should,” she says. That’s not the message you want to send to readers of your teaching statement. Your role as a teacher is to ensure that students learn, no matter how flawed you think they might be.

Don’t Ignore Your Research

By all means focus the statement on your teaching, but don’t downgrade your research, especially if you’re applying to a small liberal-arts college or a state university. “Some people think that any institution below a Research I won’t value research,” says ASU’s Mr. Haney, but many colleges want to see whether you can integrate your research and teaching.

One of the biggest trends at small colleges right now is “enhanced engagement of undergraduates and faculty research,” adds Berkeley’s Mr. Green. “They tell parents, ‘If you send Johnny here, he’s going to be involved in cutting-edge research with our faculty,’ so they’re looking for evidence that you’re going to be able to take undergraduates and utilize them in your research program.”

Get a Second Opinion

It’s a good idea to ask other people to read your statement, says Union’s Mr. Fant. Show it to your mentors, other faculty members, and peers, and if there’s a center for teaching and learning on your campus, show it to someone there as well. Let them read it, and then go back to it a week later and revise it. Then have somebody else proofread it before you send it out.

Just Be Yourself

Good readers will know when you’re exaggerating, boastful, or insincere. “I want to hear your authentic voice,” says Mr. Pannapacker of Hope College, “rather than the written equivalent of the beauty-pageant smile.”

In the end, that’s what will make you credible and maybe even help persuade a search committee to bring you in for an interview.”

Gabriela Montell is an assistant editor for Vitae.

The Next Step: 4 Ways to Make Your Statement

How to you write a statement that doesn't sound like everybody else's?

By James M. Lang

This summer I observed, with as much empathy as I could muster, the labors of two colleagues and friends who were preparing their tenure cases. Both of them asked me for advice about the area in which they thought I might have a little expertise: the statement of their teaching philosophy and principles.

Around the same time, I also received a request from a reader asking me for advice on writing a teaching statement for the job-market season. The question was the same: How do you write a statement of teaching philosophy that doesn't sound exactly like everybody else's?

In my 10 years as a tenure-track or tenured professor, I have served on more than a half-dozen search committees, all of which required statements of teaching philosophy from our candidates. Reading through those many hundreds of statements put me in the mind of a line from a Paul Simon song, "All Around the World or the Myth of Fingerprints": "I have seen them all, and man, they're all the same."

The same basic ideas and buzzwords appear in just about every teaching statement I have ever read. Everybody cares about the students, wants to challenge them, runs a student-centered classroom, relies on a mixture of lecture and discussion or other techniques, puts students first, is available to students outside the classroom, loves teaching, has learned a lot from students, integrates research and teaching, and so on and so on.

I have no doubt that most of the authors of those generic statements believe what they write, and do their best to live up to their principles. But I'm equally sure that, while a generic teaching statement won't hurt your job application or your tenure file, it won't do anything to help you, either. Its main effect will be to deepen the glaze on the eyes of readers — whether they are on a search committee or a tenure panel — who are slogging through statement after statement, searching for any evidence that will distinguish you from your fellow applicants.

The hiring season looms now, and most tenure files will be

due in just a few weeks. In a late effort to help my colleagues and readers, I offer four simple guidelines for constructing a statement of teaching philosophy that will reflect your principles and help you stand apart from the crowd.

Begin With the End

A teaching statement resembles a syllabus in that you should begin by thinking about the end. Picture a student walking out of the final exam of your course: In what way is that student different from the one who entered your classroom on the first day of the semester? What has the student learned over the course of the past three months?

You can think about that question in terms of both knowledge and skills. Do you want students to have acquired some new body of knowledge? If so, why? In what way does the acquisition of that new knowledge benefit the student or the world? Will it help the student get a job? Succeed in future courses? Live a more meaningful life?

Perhaps your focus is on helping students develop certain skills — the ability to write more persuasively, think more clearly, offer more effective presentations, solve certain kinds of problems. Again, be prepared both to articulate the precise skills that the students will have gained in your courses and the reasons those skills are important. Don't take either for granted.

Most of us probably envision our courses as helping students acquire both knowledge and skills. Your teaching statement can parse your objectives in both categories.

Make Distinctions

Unless you are seeking promotion or applying for a job at a major research university, you will probably find yourself teaching two kinds of courses: (1) those that draw upon your area of research and are aimed at majors in your discipline; and (2) service courses that your department must offer to fulfill core requirements for graduation. In my case, I teach

both upper-level courses in 20th-century British literature (my area of scholarship) and introductory courses in literature and writing.

In teaching those two types of classes, I have different objectives and use different approaches. The courses for our majors are more content-oriented; the ones that fulfill our general-education requirements are more skills-oriented. I describe the differences in the way I teach them in my own statement of teaching philosophy.

You might be able to construct objectives that are common to both your upper-level and introductory courses. For example, my desire to increase my students' attentiveness to the written word, and its effects in the world, would apply to both my composition courses and my "Contemporary British Novel" course. However, sometimes such broad objectives tip too far toward the abstract or the generic to mean much of anything.

Be Specific

The ends that you articulate will have to be at least a little abstract, which means that your next step — and the most important one, in my estimation — must be to find ways to make your philosophy concrete. You can do that quite simply by telling a story or offering a detailed description of an innovative or interesting teaching strategy you have used.

I consider a teaching statement to fall under the genre of creative nonfiction. As every teacher in that field knows, the first inclination students have when they are assigned to write an essay of creative nonfiction is to explain everything. They spill out expository prose from start to finish. As every reader of nonfiction knows, readers remember and respond to your stories, not your explanations.

So as soon as you describe your teaching objectives in the statement, tell a story or two about how your objectives have played out in the classroom. The story might focus on a particularly enlightening moment, in class or with an individual student. It might even be a moment of failure that led you to develop a new way of teaching.

If you can't or don't want to write about a specific moment or incident, then be specific by writing about some creative strategy or assignment you have used. Describe it in detail. In a two-page teaching statement, most readers would welcome a full paragraph of details about a technique you have used and refined and want the world to know about.

In the countless meetings I have sat through to discuss the applications of job candidates, the only times I have ever heard a teaching philosophy mentioned has been in reference to some memorable and specific story or strategy that a candidate described. I promise you that nobody sitting in

one of those meetings will hold up your file triumphantly and announce: "Folks, we can all go home. I have found the one candidate who believes in running a student-centered classroom!"

Cite Your Sources

Whatever philosophies you have about teaching, where did they come from? Your own experiences as an undergraduate? A faculty mentor you worked with in graduate school? Books or articles on teaching?

Whatever your sources, it reflects well on you to explain how and why you have developed your teaching principles. And doing so allows you to add another narrative element to your statement.

Suppose that your philosophy was developed by observing and working with an outstanding teacher at your graduate university. Acknowledging that debt in your statement demonstrates your eagerness to credit those who have helped you along the way, and your willingness to learn from mentors.

Suppose, by contrast, that you have developed your ideas from reading a few highly regarded books on teaching and learning. Acknowledging those sources demonstrates that you take teaching seriously enough to view it as a discipline worthy of study — a commitment that will certainly sit well with search committees and tenure panels at teaching-focused institutions.

The story of how you developed your teaching philosophy can make for a great opening. It will immediately set your statement apart from those — and they are legion — that begin with a standard expository paragraph.

If you follow my advice, you're probably still going to end up with a teaching statement that looks pretty similar to the rest of them in some ways. Every fingerprint has swirly lines, and every teaching philosophy will very likely include whatever buzzwords and catchphrases are making the rounds in academe.

The best you can hope for is that, if you take the time to craft a good one, the same principle that applies to fingerprints will apply to teaching philosophies: They may all look the same to the untrained eye, but the experts can tell them apart.

*James M. Lang is director of the Center for Teaching Excellence and professor of English at Assumption College, in Worcester, Mass. His most recent book is *Cheating Lessons: Learning From Academic Dishonesty*. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.*

What to Avoid: Don't Get Weepy!

The single most common error in the genre?
Hyper-emotionalism. Here's how to avoid it.

By Karen Kelsky

This article was first published in 2012 on Karen Kelsky's The Professor Is In blog.

Today I want to share with you an awful teaching statement (with kind permission of the writer, discipline obscured.) I don't call it "the worst teaching statement," however, because nearly all first drafts of teaching statements are so uniformly awful that it is difficult to employ the superlative in this context. But this one is very bad indeed, and bad in a way that reflects the single most common error of the genre, especially when written by women — hyper-emotionalism.

I have italicized all the words that invoke emotion and the kind of yearning and striving that is endemic to this genre, and I have bolded adjectives. (There is quite a bit of overlap between the categories, however.) The combination of emotion-alism, striving, and adjectives make this statement a maelstrom of redundant feeling-talk in place of crisp, specific, and memorable substance.

The same principles apply to the statement that apply to all other professional documents: facts over emotions, showing over telling, substance over claims, nouns (and effective verbs) over adjectives.

I am happy to say that the client's new statement bears absolutely no resemblance to this draft. Thank you, client, for being willing to share.

Teaching [my discipline] provides many opportunities to *stimulate* students' thinking about [xx] and [xx]. Students are more likely to learn when they are *comfortable* in the classroom, and when they are *engaged* with the material. To this end, I strive to give students *individualized attention* and to *foster* an understanding of the world around them through interactive learning.

This first paragraph is mostly pointless verbiage that states the obvious, and provides little substantive content, none of it memorable.

When students know their teachers *care* about them, they are more **attentive** to and more **enthusiastic** about their studies. Each quarter, I *invest time and effort* into building *long-lasting relationships* with students. I *learn* their names, interests, and motivations for taking the course. I also design activities that *encourage* students to attend office hours, and I *invite* students to visit with me at cafes and restaurants during extended "office hours." In addition, I *make myself available* through email, instant messaging, and social networking sites. Like my colleagues, I have boundaries for office hours and availability online, but I *make sure* that students *never feel hesitant* to contact me. I *appreciate* that students have other *needs and concerns*, and I recognize that *personal problems* and learning disabilities can impede their studies. *It is also my experience* that many students do not ask for help. Therefore, I *take the initiative* to contact students who seem *uninterested or unresponsive*, and I *take note* when I *notice* a sudden change in a student's behavior. *Showing a little concern can go a long way.*

This paragraph is totally enmeshed in "chick-talk"* — all emotion, caring, striving, nurturing, and poor boundaries (despite the weird disavowal). It overuses I-sentences, and is repetitive, taking nine sentences to make a single substantive point (I make myself available to students) that could be encapsulated in one. It sends a massive red flag to the committee that the candidate's priorities are skewed and she will not get her writing done for tenure. In sum, it presents the candidate as a perennial adjunct rather than tenure-track material.

Students are also more **enthusiastic** about their studies when they are engaged with the material. In the classroom, I *make every effort* to create a **supportive** and **collegial** environment, in which students *feel comfortable* to *share* their ideas and to

approach me for help. I begin each class with a **fun** and **engaging** activity related to course material. Sometimes, I play songs and ask students to interpret the lyrics. Other times, I play a short clip from a film or late-night comedy show. For example, in a class on [xx], I showed a clip on [xx] from the film [xx]. I also *invite* students to bring in songs, videos and news articles for participation points. These activities allow students to participate in alternative ways, and they provide opportunities for students to see how [xx] informs their everyday lives and experiences. During sections, I also incorporate **creative**, but **purposeful**, activities that *stimulate* students' interest in [xx]. In addition to giving mini-lectures to clarify the readings, I use a combination of small- and large-group discussions, simulations, and jeopardy review games. For each class I teach, I also create a blog, where I post each week's agenda, discussion questions, and learning objectives. The blogs also provide an interactive forum for student-to-student and student-to-teacher communication, and they *allow me to present information* in multiple ways to *better accommodate* different learning styles.

This paragraph contains some substantive teaching methods but buries them in more feeling-talk. Also, she overuses lists and adjectives in describing the methods, and employs a term — “mini-lectures” — that is self-minimizing or juvenilizing. Finally, she has so little concrete substance about her teaching as tied to her discipline that little effort was required to disguise her discipline: As you can see, I made only a handful of redactions..

As an educator, I have a **unique** opportunity help my students become better citizens who *care more* about the world around them. To make the most of this opportunity, I examine my own practices and *strive* to constantly improve upon them. To this end, I seek student feedback through the use of anonymous evaluations. These evaluations help students *feel more invested* in the course, and they *help me* know what and how to change in order to make my teaching more effective. If students come away from my class *caring even a little bit more* about [xx] than they did at the start of the quarter, all the better.

This paragraph deploys the worst adjective of all — “unique” — and then catapults us back into feeling- and striving-land. While it is fine to refer to ways you improve

your teaching, one sentence on this suffices. In this case, she over-narrates the point, then makes it again subordinate to the cause of emotions. Finally, her phrasing implies that all of her teaching needs changing to be more effective.

In sum, through all of these techniques, this candidate renders herself, with the best of intentions, as an adjunct with poor boundaries and questionable emotional distance from her students, who is fundamentally not tenure-track material.

**I am of course aware that this is a sexist term. However, as I've said before, the Professor Is In blog is not devoted to what I, a lifelong feminist, want to be true in the world, but to what I believe IS true in the world, which in this case is that women are perceived as excessively emotional and are socialized in America to do the lion's share of emotion-talk and emotion-work. Any professional document by a woman that deploys emotion in conspicuous ways is going to associate the writer with those biases and sabotage her professional chances. There are men who write weepy teaching statements, although less often, and when I encounter these I make the same critiques and edits, and tell them that their writing sounds feminized.*

Karen Kelsky is a career consultant who runs the website The Professor Is In. She's been a tenured professor at two public universities (Oregon and Illinois) and has advised many undergraduate and graduate students, as well as mentored junior faculty. She answers reader questions as a contributor to Vitae.

What to Include: Teaching Statement as Self-Portrait

Drop the abstract description and make your statement a window into your classroom style.

By Mary Anne Lewis

Just two years ago, I was in the same position that many of you are in now, namely on the academic job market. The fall semester is under way and, in addition to dissertation work and teaching obligations, you have to write and revise some dense documents for your job applications. Those documents, far from conversational in tone, have to represent your past five to eight (or more) years of academic work in a clear, compelling, articulate, elegant way that demonstrates your unique contributions to your field. And you should have finished your other dissertation chapter. And your dishes are dirty. And you have run out of socks.

I found crafting a “statement of teaching philosophy” particularly elusive. What is it exactly, I wondered, and how does one write such a statement? Should the tone be philosophical, practical, entertaining, or some combination of all three?

I decided to approach the task by conducting some preliminary research. But after asking other students and professors about these statements, I received such a variety of answers that I decided to look at samples for myself. I read teaching statements written by colleagues and friends alike, as well as others that had been posted online, and I studied the chapter on teaching statements in my trusty guide, *The Academic Job Search Handbook*. Eventually, I closed the books, put away the samples, and tried writing my own teaching statement.

With that first mediocre version in hand, I walked into the Yale University Teaching Center to discuss my draft with Bill Rando, the center’s director at the time. Quietly, he read and reread my statement. Then he turned to me and simply said, “Tell me what you are trying to convey.” I realized I could not succinctly answer his question, and I told him so.

So we began to talk about teaching. I remembered my own experiences as an undergraduate. I remembered learning about distant parts of the world that had seemed unreachable before my initial courses on Francophone literature. I remembered reading beautifully written stories in another language; imagining all the people I could speak to and get to know now; marveling at the historical, cultural, political, and

even economic stakes of language. As Bill and I talked, I was reminded of just how much there is to consider on the topic of teaching. More specifically, I began to remember those moments of discovery that had prompted me to pursue graduate studies in the first place.

With Bill’s help, I quickly saw that I was telling too much in my teaching statement and showing too little. Paragraph after paragraph came across as generic at best, and overbearing or pedantic at worst. Something I had become so convinced of through my own teaching of literature — the primacy of close examination of textual subtleties — was simply not coming through in my statement. It was prescriptive rather than descriptive, full of jargon and lacking in detail and precision. There was no suspense, no moment, no real sense of me as a teacher. Clearly I had to rethink my approach.

I left Bill’s office and took a long walk down Grove Street. When I returned home, I went over to my bookcases, looking for the books from an undergraduate seminar I had taught (in conjunction with Alice Kaplan, a professor in our department) on Albert Camus and the postwar period. I pulled down all my books from that class and lined them up across my desk. I then began, at random, to read my notes in the margins. I looked through the passages I had marked up over the course of the semester, and I took my time, placing myself back in that classroom with my students. Ultimately, it was the description of the dying rats, those first harbingers of the plague in Camus’s *La Peste*, that beckoned me most.

And just like that, I began rewriting my teaching statement as a self-portrait, rather than as a treatise. One small part of my teaching — that moment with *La Peste* — would have to stand for the whole. But I would describe that moment in as much detail as memory, skill, and word count would allow. Soon I was recalling class discussions about specific passages of the book; theoretical questions about how it is that one reads, and why; what reading is; how language functions; the problematics of translation; and the complexities of genre, reception, and national identity. My statement became more

concrete and evocative. I was showing, rather than telling.

I see now just how powerfully a moment in the classroom stands apart in a self-portrait of teaching. In clear, specific, memorable ways, that moment can suggest the tone of the classroom, the place of the text, the lessons to be gleaned, and the questions being investigated. It shows the teacher with the students and tells the story of a group of people grappling with uncertainty, creating meaning as a unit, moving together in a rhythm they define and redefine, functioning as several parts of one whole.

Finding that moment meant doing away with vague statements about what teaching is, what it should be, or how it works in the abstract. Rather, I needed to go back to the seminar room where the students and I met each week. I needed to set the scene — there I was, with fourteen undergraduates, sitting around a rectangular table, comparing the various editions of *The Stranger* in both English and French. Another day, we were thinking about Camus's eerie, dramatic, absurd description of the diseased rats and their fantastical, theatrical pirouettes. In another moment, we were exploring the import of the historical, cultural, and political contexts in which the book was written and in which it has been received and interpreted. We were noticing the details and nuance of word choice, subject matter, the said and the unsaid, the beautiful and the grotesque, the interactions among content and aesthetic.

From that moment, and all it stood for, my portrait moved to a more general description of my teaching background, experiences, preparation, and methodology, before concluding with another nod toward *The Plague*. Ultimately, I pirouetted back to the text.

And now, job candidates, let us return to you as you write your own statement. A year ago, not long after I had accepted an academic position myself, I participated on a search committee and read many teaching statements from the “other side of the table.” Many of them rather quickly started to blend together in my memory. On the other hand, some stood out: the ones that were specific, that told a story, and that left me with a clear sense of the candidate as a teacher. I left those few statements with an image and feeling in mind; the candidate's self-portrait had made its mark.

I'll end, then, with this advice: As you work and rework, crafting and finessing your self-portrait in teaching, I hope you can take time to remember, in glorious detail, a moment or two in your own classroom. And then tell your future employers what happened, what you and your students encountered that day, what you resolved and concluded and how, and what questions remained. Paint the portrait. And good luck in your search.

Mary Anne Lewis is an assistant professor of modern foreign languages at Ohio Wesleyan University.

Beyond the Document: My Philosophy of Teaching

It's not just newcomers to the profession who need to hone their classroom approach.

By Rob Jenkins

Most teaching statements are written by people who — let's be honest — don't really know that much about teaching. Usually the writers are first-time job seekers with a year or two as a graduate assistant or an adjunct under their belts.

Battle-scarred classroom veterans, unless they happen to be going on the market, rarely write a statement of teaching philosophy. But maybe they should.

My philosophy of teaching has been forged over more than 32 years, 26 of those as an instructor. As a student, I attended a private liberal-arts college and a midsized regional university. I've taught at a large land-grant university, a small rural community college, a large metropolitan community college, and a suburban technical college.

Like everyone in the profession, I came to the job with a number of preconceived notions, based partly on observations of my own teachers, both good and bad, and partly on my perception of how things should operate in a perfect world. Most of those notions proved false or impractical, and the jury is still out on the rest.

In addition, since I also spent 11 years supervising faculty members, my teaching philosophy has been profoundly influenced by my experiences with colleagues. I've had the great good fortune to observe and learn from some of the best teachers in the world. I've also known a few faculty members whose chief contribution to my development was to strengthen my resolve never — ever — to do certain things.

Please note that in sharing my philosophy, I'm not suggesting that it's the definitive approach or encouraging anyone else to adopt it. I'm simply sharing what I've come to believe.

College Students Are Adults

People tend to rise or fall to the level that is expected of them. Make it clear that you think students are stupid and, odds are, they will underperform. Act like you expect them to misbehave, and your classroom will probably resemble a war zone. But if you tell students upfront that you consider them to be adults, and then treat them accordingly, most will at-

tempt to live up to the label. That's certainly been the case in my classroom over the years.

Treating students like adults means you allow them the freedoms that adults enjoy — to be late for class, for instance, to miss it altogether, or to leave early if that's what they need to do. At the same time, you make it clear that, as adults, they are responsible for all the material in the course, whether or not they were in class on a particular day.

That approach has profound implications for every aspect of classroom management, from discipline to attendance to late papers. Students like it because they think of themselves as adults and appreciate being viewed that way. (College students despise few things more than being treated as though they were still in high school.) And it's good for professors because it shifts the responsibility for “keeping up” onto the students, where it belongs.

Teaching Is Performance Art

I wish I had coined that phrase, or at least knew who did. I just know that it has become one of my foundational beliefs.

The concept of the teacher as performer, as “the sage on the stage,” has fallen out of favor in recent years. But the fact is, we are sages and we are on a stage. How we perform — that is, how we teach — is every bit as important as what we teach.

Moreover, how our students respond to us — and by extension, to our subject matter — depends largely on the quality of the performance we give in class, day in and day out. Want to engage your students, capture their interest, motivate them to do more and be more? Then pay attention to voice inflection and body language, just as an actor would. Practice your timing. Play to your audience. Inject some humor. Entertain.

That doesn't mean you have to make yourself the focal point of the classroom all the time. Class discussions, group work, and other non-teacher-centric strategies can also be effective. But when the curtain goes up and it's your time to shine, go out there and knock 'em dead.

Great Teachers May Be Born, but Good Teachers Are Made

The ability to become a great teacher — one who inspires students and seems to connect with them effortlessly — is a gift, an innate talent like musical ability or athletic prowess.

Just like any other gift, it can either be squandered or put to good use. The very best teachers are those who have the gift and have worked hard over many years to further develop it — although we often overlook the hard work because they make being a great teacher look so easy.

But what about those of us who may not have “the gift,” or at least not to the same degree? Can we, too, become great teachers? Maybe not, but we can become good ones.

Just as with any other skill, the key to becoming a good teacher is to want to become one. My teenage son will probably never play in the NBA. But he has become a fine high-school basketball player by studying the game, learning all he can from his coaches, and spending hours honing his skills. The path to becoming a good teacher is no different.

You Don't Have to Be a Jerk

If you consistently place your ego and personal interests ahead of others' needs — even when those needs should be paramount — then you are a jerk. The teacher as jerk can take many forms: someone who never returns papers, who avoids office hours, who passes the buck on advising, who thinks that his or her time is more important than anyone else's.

There is also the more obvious type of jerk, the one who berates and embarrasses students in front of classmates; who responds to questions with superciliousness, arrogance, or even open contempt; whose default response to any situation is to take the extreme hard line.

When I was an administrator, I occasionally dealt with such faculty members, like the one who delayed a student's graduation an entire semester because he wouldn't accept a paper that was one hour late. I usually tried to reason with those people but often found them impervious to reason. In the end, if they had followed policy to the letter, I had to support them, but I didn't like it. I thought they were being jerks.

I'm well aware of the school of thought that says teachers have to behave like jerks for the sake of their students. The world is full of jerks, this philosophy goes — heck, most of their bosses will be jerks — so we as their professors have an obligation to cultivate jerkiness in order to prepare them for the real world. Hence the hard-line approach, the overly strict interpretation of policy, the refusal to budge an inch.

I've never bought that philosophy. In my experience, most of the people who espouse it don't actually know anything

about the “real world.” They're just trying to justify being jerks. And I don't believe for a moment that they really have students' best interests at heart. Occasionally a student does need to learn a hard lesson in personal responsibility. But every student needs a break now and then, and most of them won't ever get to those corporate jobs we're so worried about if we don't cut them some slack now and then.

Besides, I spend zero time worrying about whether students are taking advantage of me. My goal is to help students succeed while still holding them to a reasonable standard. If some take advantage and that ends up hurting them down the road — when a boss or perhaps another professor isn't quite as understanding — that's their responsibility, not mine.

All You Need Is Love

Well, maybe that's not all you need to be a good teacher. It helps to have an advanced degree, and maybe some actual knowledge of the subject matter. But in teaching, as in other human relationships, a little love goes a long way.

When I talk about love, I mean, first and foremost, love for students. Of course you're not going to experience strong affection for every student, and that's probably just as well. There will be some you don't like much at all. That's normal.

But a good teacher has a love for students in general. I make that point because I've known so many teachers who seem to dislike students, even to hold them in contempt. You can tell by what they say about students in private.

Whenever I hear a faculty member constantly talking about how stupid or rude students are, I think to myself, “Then why are you doing this?” It's little wonder that their teaching ratings show that students don't care much for them, either.

Also when I talk about love, I'm referring to love of the subject matter. We've all had teachers who appeared bored with their own lectures, disenchanted with their assignments, and indifferent to class discussion. Then we've had teachers whose passion for their subject matter made us feel passionate about it, too. For many of us, it was the latter group who inspired us to become teachers.

Of course, even if you clearly love teaching, grant students adult status, give an Oscar-worthy performance every day, and resist your jerkier impulses, that doesn't mean your students will come to love your class. But at least maybe they won't hate it — or you — quite as much.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English at Georgia Perimeter College and author of Building a Career in America's Community Colleges. The opinions expressed here are his own and not necessarily those of his employer. Follow Rob on Twitter: @HigherEdSpeak.

Why It's Time for Teaching Statements to Die

Reading them is almost as tiring as writing them.
Let's overhaul a foolish job-application requirement.

By Leonard Cassuto

The season for academic job hunting is upon us. It's a time when graduate students sweat the details of their applications. It's also a time when they all become philosophers—well, philosophers of teaching, anyway.

Not every institution requires job applicants to submit a “teaching philosophy” statement, but enough of them do that it seems no graduate student on the market today can escape having to write one. And not just in the humanities. I've read statements written by students in many other fields, including the sciences.

The requirement is especially common at colleges with heavy course loads, where teaching is more closely scrutinized and weighs more heavily in tenure decisions.

Hiring committees at those colleges must have a tough time because teaching philosophies account for some of the most tiresome reading that academe has to offer (and that's saying something). But those committee members can't be as tired as the graduate students who write the things. I've helped many a student craft a teaching philosophy during my years as an adviser, placement director, and graduate chair. The writers always suffer through the task.

Nor do the results justify the pain. Most of the teaching philosophies I've read have ranged from forgettable to terrible. And why shouldn't they? “Teaching philosophy” is a misbegotten genre.

It's a genre that has nonetheless penetrated the profession. Teaching statements proliferate because employers seek more and more ways to make distinctions among better- and better-qualified job candidates. To separate them, we give them more and more hoops to jump through, such as the absurd demand that they cast a philosophical eye back on a career that they haven't even started yet. These ever-escalating application requirements amount to professional cruelty, and the rise of the teaching philosophy illustrates that.

Who ever heard of someone with fewer than five years of experience at a job having a “philosophy” of how to perform it? I've been teaching at the college level for about 30 years,

and I don't have a teaching philosophy either — unless you call “follow your nose and steal what looks good” a philosophy of teaching.

Who ever heard of young people having a well-thought-out philosophy of anything? We might expect experienced savants — and only some of those — to have philosophies of life or work. Yet here we are asking our apprentices to come up with these statements. No wonder the results are lackluster.

Defenders of the teaching philosophy may accuse me of fussing about a name. To which I would answer, first of all, that names are important. They establish expectations—and in the case of teaching philosophies, expectations of the most burdensome sort.

Second, it's not just a matter of a name. Let's imagine that we could all agree on a more neutral name for this troublesome document — call it just a “teaching statement,” say. That would solve the problem of ponderousness, but not of expectation. It would still leave the job candidate struggling to find something summative to say about her approach to a profession she only recently entered.

Defenders of the teaching philosophy, who seem as rare as hunchbacked giraffes (I know I've never seen one), might say that I'm just being uptight. Of course graduate students don't have a full-blown philosophy, this argument goes, but we're just asking them to talk about their teaching. It's a useful exercise, in other words.

Useful exercises have their place. We ask applicants to Ph.D. programs to project forward to a dissertation topic, for example. On its face, that convention is silly, too: Applicants want to go to graduate school in order to learn to write a dissertation, so how can they describe what's in it ahead of time? But we should remember that we're asking applicants to think of a plausible thesis topic, not expatiate on their research philosophy. Everyone understands that the exercise is a fiction, but it's a useful fiction. That's because when writers embrace it, readers get to watch the minds of potential doctoral students at work on a revealing task.

A teaching philosophy is not a useful exercise. Instead, it's what writing teachers would call "a bad prompt."

Bad prompts produce bad writing from good writers. A bad prompt confuses its respondents. When a discussion leader asks a badly phrased question, it produces blank looks. Bad prompts do the same thing. "Write your teaching philosophy" is a bad prompt because writers may not understand what is being asked. (For that matter, I'm not sure that those doing the prompting are so sure, either.)

More often, a bad prompt steers writers away from what they know. It throws them into unfamiliar terrain that doesn't allow them to show their skills. They try to embrace the task, but they can't get their arms around it, so their attempts look mechanical, even clumsy.

I recall only one excellent teaching philosophy in my career. I'd like to say it was my own, but mine was lost to posterity years ago when my laptop was stolen. I have no memory of what I wrote, which is the surest indication that posterity isn't missing much.

The fine entry I'm thinking of was written by a computer scientist. He spoke of his work teaching people how to read at his local public library, and of the courses he hoped to design if hired. His account was vivid and specific. It's worth pointing out, though, that he was applying to only one college. Also of note: The author was already past 50, a veteran of another career who was already comfortably employed but looking for a specific new job. Put simply, the situation and the candidate were exceptional. (P.S. He got the job.)

The computer scientist's teaching philosophy stood out not only because of the writer's maturity but also because he knew enough to ground himself in the particulars. He wasn't really "philosophizing" at all.

How might we redesign the teaching-philosophy prompt to ask younger and less-experienced candidates to do the same thing?

We need to prompt for the particulars that we want to see. Because the particulars of a new teacher's work and interests are what we're interested in, right? Asking for a "teaching philosophy" (or a "teaching statement") drops a grand piano of expectation out the window onto the applicant's head.

I have a simple alternative: Let's ask for an annotated course syllabus designed by the applicant.

What to include would be up to the writer. The annotations could describe the arc of the course, the sequence of the assignments, or the reason for assigning one reading instead of another. Those explanations might even get — dare I say it? — philosophical, but within the framework of a particular course plan.

A syllabus provides a skeleton that's individual and partic-

ular to begin with. I've found over the years that I can learn a lot about teachers — apprentice or otherwise — by looking at their syllabi. An annotated syllabus supplies even more information. If the reader's goal is to learn something about how a graduate student approaches the work of teaching, we could do worse than to ask for an annotated syllabus.

Actually, we're doing a lot worse now. So let's ask our students to talk about their teaching in a way that they — and we — can understand and learn something from. And let's allow them to delay becoming philosophers until they have at least a gray hair or two.

Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, writes regularly about graduate education for The Chronicle of Higher Education. His new book, The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It, will be published in September by Harvard University Press. His Twitter handle: @LCassuto.

Links and Resources

Vitae

<http://www.chroniclevitae.com>

Career advice, networking tools, and a database of jobs, brought to you by The Chronicle of Higher Education.

The Professor Is In

<http://theprofessorisin.com>

Academic career advice from Karen Kelsky.

Mary Anne Lewis's Teaching Statement

<https://chroniclevitae.com/news/734-teaching-statement-as-self-portrait>

See how the professor uses a moment with Camus to explain her philosophy.

Writing Samples and Teaching Statements

<http://chronicle.com/article/Writing-SamplesTeaching/125726>

Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer Furlong tackle questions about both documents.