

## TWENTY-FIVE

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### Just Say No to the Weepy Teaching Statement

Teaching statements are without a doubt the hardest of all job documents to write. The genre is rarely explained, the expectations are unclear, the expected content at first blush seems obvious and rote, and feelings about teaching are often intense and hard to articulate in academic prose. Because of these challenges, teaching statements are often appallingly bad, and they are bad in consistent ways.

Here are the major problems with the typical teaching statement first draft:

#### 1. It Is Too Long

A teaching statement should be no longer than one page. A teaching statement is always subsidiary to the job letter and CV. As I've explained, search committee members are fatigued and distracted. While some dedicated individuals might enjoy reading multiple pages on teaching, the vast majority will not. A short teaching statement is easy to digest. Everything you need to say can be easily said in one page. Of course I mean one page with legible 11- or 12-point type and one-inch margins.

You know how when you get ready for a long backpacking trip, and they tell you to pack your backpack with everything you think you need, walk around the block with it, come back, and take half out? Well, when you write a professional job document, write everything you think need to say, then go back and take half out. Always write less than you think you need.

#### 2. You Tell a Story Instead of Making Statements Supported by Evidence

This is the most common pitfall of the teaching statement. Candidates think the genre requires the "story of my teaching life." For example:

I always like to use multimedia materials in the classroom. I first discovered the value of these when I taught Introduction to Cultural Anthropology at East Tennessee State last spring. In that class I had the opportunity to use a wide range of videos and online materials. Students told me that they really loved these, and I came to feel that these are excellent methods for promoting in-class discussions. I plan to use them in future classes as well.

Some of you probably think that the above is fine, but it isn't. It rambles and tells instead of shows. We don't want the Story of Teaching. We want principles of teaching, and evidence that you exemplify these principles in specific classroom goals and practices.

Remember that this piece of writing is sometimes called a Teaching Philosophy. I dislike that term, because I think it encourages writers to make the errors of emotionalism and navel-gazing rumination. However, it does clarify that the statement has to articulate a wide general good that can be achieved through university pedagogy at its broadest level. Then the writer demonstrates, in concrete and specific terms, how this good is manifested in specific teaching strategies, with examples. Then evidence is provided to show it was done effectively. Then there is a conclusion. And the essay is finished.

To repeat: wide general good—>teaching strategies that manifest this good—>examples from specific classes—>evidence that the strategies were effective—>conclusion.

### 3. You Express Sentiments That Are Saccharine, Obvious, and Indistinguishable from Countless Other Applicants'

All too often, the "wide general good" that writers fall back on is some tired blahdeddy blah about "encouraging discussion" and "supporting a variety of viewpoints" and "hands-on learning" and "promoting critical thinking" and "creating engaged learners" and . . . oh, sorry, I fell asleep.

Please recall that the search committee is reading something like 300 of these. Of those 300, approximately 285 are going to say that the writer "cares passionately about teaching," "uses a variety of multimedia materials," "promotes discussion," and "strives to educate students to be critical thinkers."

The sentiments you express in your statement cannot be saccharine or hackneyed or obvious. Your teaching motivations need to arise from a sharp and incisive understanding of your discipline and its contributions to the greater good. Then you need to give actual examples from classes that you have taught, examples that are not painfully obvious ("I use small group discussions!") but rather vivid and memorable ("I assigned mini-ethnographies of the local meatpacking district and then students shared these in a student symposium in the last week of term"). Ideally your teaching method will be memorable enough that reviewers will be able to say later, "She's that one who does those mini-ethnographies of the meat-packers, right?"

### 4. You Misread Your Audience

You may well have to write two teaching statements, one for a teaching-oriented SLAC, and one for a research institution. These won't be wildly different, but they may differ to a degree. Your

readers want evidence that your teaching goals are consistent with the mission of the institution. If it is a SLAC, then you'll want to emphasize your methods for and successes in teaching small, intimate classes, and incorporating undergraduates in your research, for example. If it is a giant land-grant college, then you'll be best served by describing your success in using innovative methods and technologies to teach lecture courses of hundreds of students.

### 5. You Are Excessively Humble, Especially If You Are Female

Lines such as

"I was honored to have the opportunity to be entrusted with the core seminar in X,"

"I was fortunate to be selected for the award in X,"

"I hope that my methods will encourage students to . . ." or

"I am always striving to improve my skills and seek training in new methods"

may seem charming and engaged, but are actually overly submissive and self-sabotaging. It is not an "honor" and a "privilege" to teach—it is a basic responsibility of a scholarly job. Speak of it as such.

### 6. You Are Excessively Emotional, Especially If You Are Female

Lines such as

"I am delighted when students tell me . . ."

"I would be thrilled to teach your course in X,"

"I am so excited to use new materials,"

"It would be a great pleasure to create new courses,"

"I would love to be a part of . . .," or

"I can't say enough about how much I enjoy . . ."

may seem friendly and engaged, but are actually overly emotional and highly feminized in ways that sabotage your chances by substituting emotion for facts.

Women in particular must beware of their tendency to overinvest in this type of verbiage. Teaching at the tenure track level is not about being nice. The more efforts you make to sound nice, the more you sound like a perennial replacement adjunct.

Those who are competitive in the tenure track market articulate a teaching persona that is consistent with their researcher persona: serious, rigorous, disciplinarily cutting-edge, demanding, and with high standards and expectations. Of course it is important to show your collegiality, but that happens later, during the interviews and campus visit.

### 7. You Fail to Link Your Research and Teaching into a Single Consistent Whole

The teaching statement is not meant to suddenly depart from your scholarly persona to tell a random new story about how nice you are and how much you care about students. The teaching statement is meant to demonstrate that you are as self-directed, resourceful, and innovative in the classroom as you are in your research and writing. The connections between these personae should be seamless. If you are dedicated to new approaches to medieval manuscripts in your research, then show us how you use medieval manuscript replicas in your classroom to instruct students in paleographic methods. If you are dedicated to critiquing postapocalyptic fantasy in your research, then show how you have students deconstruct episodes of *The Walking Dead*. If you study the role of death in Shakespearean drama, then show how you have your students stage one of the corpse scenes from *Hamlet*.

Remember to always stay on message.

### 8. You Don't Have a Conclusion

All professional documents should conclude with a broad gesture toward the wider import of your work. A line that dribbles off like "And I received positive feedback for that class" is painfully deflating to read. Finish strong. An example might be "In sum, all of my pedagogical strategies are dedicated to teaching the debates and controversies animating political life in ways that will remain with the student long after he or she leaves my classroom." Or "To conclude, whether in small classes or large, I am dedicated to bringing the insights of political science to students' lived experience, both at the local and global level."

I want to share with you a particularly awful teaching statement (with kind permission of the writer, discipline obscured). It isn't the worst teaching statement I've ever seen 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 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. The combination of emotionalism, striving, and adjectives makes this teaching statement a maelstrom of redundant feeling-talk in place of crisp and memorable substance.

Teaching [my discipline] provides many opportunities to *stimulate* students' thinking about X and X. 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.

The 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 cafés 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 emotion-talk—all 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 X, I showed a clip on X from the film X. 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 X informs their everyday lives and experiences. During sections, I also incorporate **creative** but **purposeful** activities that *stimulate* students’ interest in X. In addition to giving mini-lectures to clarify the readings, I use a combination of small- and large-group discussions, simulations, and *Jeopardy!*-like 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, there are only a handful of Xs.

As an educator, I have a **unique** opportunity to 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 X than they did at the start of the quarter, *all the better.*

This paragraph deploys the most hackneyed 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 intervention to be effective.

Through all of these errors of approach, this candidate renders

herself, with the best of intentions, as someone with poor boundaries and questionable emotional distance from her students. Fortunately, she transformed the statement by the final draft. Unfortunately, I cannot share the revised document because it is now so detailed that her anonymity would be compromised. That's a good thing—it means that the revised statement has replaced generalizations with specificities, that it shows rather than tells.

## TWENTY-SIX

### Evidence of Teaching Effectiveness

Some job applications request a teaching portfolio or “evidence of teaching effectiveness.” This goes beyond the basic teaching statement discussed in the previous chapter to encompass sample syllabi, proposed course descriptions, a list of courses, evaluations or a summary of evaluations, and the complete evaluations (both numerical and narrative) for one or two courses.

I will take each of these in turn.

The *sample syllabi* should reflect courses you have taught that are in some way similar to the courses you'll be asked to teach at the job for which you're applying. You do not need to write a new syllabus for one of the courses currently on their books (unless, of course, that is requested in the ad). Your purpose here is simply to give evidence that you know how to put together a class in a related area, with appropriate organization, subject coverage, assigned readings, and course assignments and exams. The syllabi you submit should be substantive and complete, with complete course descriptions at the top that demonstrate your pedagogical commitments in the classes. Don't excise the basic policy section; they want to know how you've dealt with issues of plagiarism and cheating. However, if your campus imposes pages of legal boilerplate, that does not need to be included.

Resist the temptation to create a “mega-class” to impress the search committee. I did this once, my first year on the job market,

and a tenured friend said, gently, "Um, I'm not sure this class is actually teachable." Remember, they want evidence that your courses are viable for actual students. Keep the readings and assignments reasonable, and don't use the syllabus as a stealth bibliography of your dissertation topic.

Be particularly careful to match the quantity and difficulty level of the readings to both the level of course and the status and type of school to which you're applying. You may have been educated exclusively, in both undergraduate and graduate school, at Ivy Leagues or elite RIs, but those are not necessarily the types of schools to which you're applying. Adjust your expectations. An advanced undergrad class at an elite RI can include a substantial reading load, while an advanced undergrad class at a regional teaching college, with an entirely different type of student body, should be dialed down. If you are unsure, Google syllabi for courses at the institution or other institutions of similar type and rank.

The *course descriptions/proposals* will be one-page sketches of new courses that you propose to develop. These documents are not complete syllabi with exhaustive policies and weekly assignments. This one-page, single-spaced document should include the following:

- Title of the course.
- Your name.
- Approximate level of the course.
- Envisioned enrollment of the course.
- A two-paragraph description of the course. Paragraph one will introduce an important theme or topic in the world that the course will address. By "in the world," I mean that it is an existing phenomenon that is worthy of study, and not some arcane and pedantic micro-argument about scholarly minutiae of interest to you, your advisor, and four other tenured professors in Norway. Please recall that syllabi are for *students*. The topic must speak to *students*. The second paragraph will describe the broad subtopic breakdown introduced by the course, and the readings or themes on which the course will be based. It will mention one or two innovative assignments. If there is room, a brief third

paragraph can show how the course fits into and advances existing initiatives and foci of the department.

- A "mini-syllabus": a single-spaced ten- or sixteen-line week-by-week list of the course topics.

The course will be read with an eye to its appeal to the students. Particularly if it's an undergraduate course, its appeal to undergraduates should be instantly apparent. The writing should sell. Don't be pedantic here. Consider starting with an intriguing question: "What do shows like *CSI* and *Bones* tell us about forensic science in America?" "Is the world running out of fresh water?" "What do Mark Twain and Danielle Steel have in common?" "One hundred and fifty years after the close of the Civil War, what is the status of race in America?"

The course should be innovative, and reflect new trends in your field(s). They already have old faculty doing old stuff. Your job is to do the new. It should capitalize on new technology and social media. These are transforming university pedagogy, and your job is to handle that for the other faculty who are too behind the times to figure it out.

It should be tailored to their department and campus. And its subject should relate to the job. If the job is for contemporary East Asia, don't submit your fabulous gender studies seminar, unless it is primarily East Asia based. If it is a gender studies job, don't submit your East Asia seminar unless it is primarily about gender.

It should not duplicate what is already there. They are hiring you to expand their coverage, not replicate it.

Your *list of courses taught* should include the names, the level, and the enrollment. Descriptions are unnecessary, although you can divide this list into undergraduate and graduate subheadings if you wish. If the position is an interdisciplinary or joint one, divide by department or area. Do not include course numbers; these are meaningless outside of the campus. Anth 1102 on one campus might be Anth 20 on another campus; the numbers just distract.

Lastly, you'll want a *brief summary of your evaluations*. I say "brief," because I do not believe it to be appropriate to send exhaustive archives of your numerical and narrative teaching evaluations from all of your classes (unless, of course, they are requested specifically).

These will most likely not be read, and may well exhaust the search committee by their sheer volume.

Rather, find a way to summarize your numerical evaluations in a table, and then give a sample of the written comments. Here are two examples, provided (and anonymized) by readers of the blog.

Teaching Evaluations for XXX University

	Overall	How much did this course contribute to your education? Consider factors as learning, exposure to new ideas, intellectual growth	How effectively did the instructor conduct class?	How would you evaluate the instructor's responses to your work?	To what extent was the instructor helpful to your learning outside of class?	Please rate your own level of effort in this course.
Introduction to XXX (Spring 2013)	6.24	6.4	6.6	5.8	6.6	5.8
Introduction to YYY (Fall 2012)	6.25	5.64	6.36	6.6	6.0	6.65
Intermediate XXX (Fall 2012)	5.81	5.2	6.0	6.0	6.25	5.6
Gen Ed Course XXX (Spring 2012)	6.28	6.25	6.25	6.0	6.6	6.3

Mean scores: 1 = poor, 7 = excellent

You might consider sending the *complete evaluation set, both numerical and narrative, from a single class*. That would allow for an objective view, rather than the edited view that arises from your picking and choosing narrative comments, for example. I would suggest sending a combination of summary of evaluations and one complete evaluation set (both numerical and narrative) for a single course.

No matter what you submit, in all of your teaching documents it is critical to be vigilant about the difference between your teaching *as a TA* and *as instructor of record*. In your selection of materials

### Qualitative Written Evaluations (scanned forms available upon request)

"I really enjoyed this course because I feel that it provided a lot of new information that I didn't know before. I also thought that Professor XXX really taught the class well with discussion questions and such. I liked the presentation style of the class with students presenting and also the professor."

"There was a lot of student involvement with small group discussion and bringing it into the larger group. Also, the presentations were interesting."

"She provided instant feedback on our reading responses and interview assignments, which I liked because I could see how I was doing throughout the semester. She also handed back our paper proposal rather quickly."

"My cultural perspective has been challenged many times and in effect has helped me form a more open mind. I could see our exchange students and their struggles and was able to form new friendships outside of the classroom."

"Professor XXX was very helpful and available for students who wished to speak with her regarding their research papers or presentations that they were giving to the class."

"Professor XXX was always willing to meet with me for a longer period of time regarding my work or just speak briefly about it. I really appreciated her willingness to help!"

to include, always prioritize the classes for which you were primary instructor. Only use TA materials if you don't have any instructor of record teaching experience. In general, if the narrative evaluations from TA discussion sections were excellent, include them, but not at the expense of equally excellent or even just solid alternatives from your solo-taught courses.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

### The Research Statement

The research statement is more variable in length than the cover letter and teaching statement. In the humanities and soft social sciences, two pages generally suffices. In general, I find that two pages allows for an elaboration of the research well beyond the summary in the cover letter, and gives the search committee substantial information to work with, while remaining attentive to the principle of search committee exhaustion. Some social science fields such as psychology tend to longer statements of three to four pages. In the sciences research statements are also longer (about four pages) often to make room for figures. Never simply assume that longer is better in an RS or in any job document. As always, I urge all job seekers to investigate the norms of their fields carefully, and follow the advice they receive on this matter from experts there.

Before moving on, let me clarify that the research statement I discuss in this chapter is the document requested as part of a basic job application. This is not the "research proposal" required by fellowship or postdoc applications. That genre of writing I discuss in part VIII.

Here are other rules:

- Use 11- or 12-point type and one-inch margins.
- Print on regular printer paper, not letterhead.