

# Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement

*Beth Fisher, Associate Director of The Teaching Center, is available to read and comment on drafts of Teaching Philosophy Statements written by graduate students at Washington University. You should also ask faculty advisors, mentors, and peers to read your statement and provide feedback to help you improve its effectiveness and clarity.*

## What is a Teaching Philosophy Statement?

The Statement is a one- to two-page document that provides a clear, concise account of your teaching approach, methods, and expertise. *Each statement should be unique.* Nonetheless, the following guidelines should be helpful to you as you prepare your statement. A Teaching Philosophy Statement should answer four fundamental questions: **1) Why do you teach? 2) What do you teach? 3) How do you teach? 4) How do you measure your effectiveness?**

**1. Why do you teach?** Why are you drawn to the rewards and challenges of teaching? What is it that you can accomplish in teaching that you find particularly valuable and worthwhile? When you teach, for example, you can mentor students and contribute to their intellectual growth, gain new perspectives on topics that occupy your research, and reexamine the key ideas and assumptions that shape the production of knowledge in your field.

**2. What do you teach?** What are the specific subjects and courses you are prepared to teach? What are your *objectives for student learning*? Why are these objectives important? Do your objectives differ depending on the type of course or the background of students you are teaching? If so, how? What should students gain from taking your courses? Examples include an understanding of foundational concepts in the field, sophistication as critical thinkers, or the ability to write concise and well-supported arguments.

**3. How do you teach?** What teaching methods and strategies do you use

to meet your objectives? Do you prefer lecturing, leading discussions, or group work? Do you use a combination of these methods? *Why and in what circumstances?* What kinds of assignments and assessments do you use? *Why?* How do you take into account students' varied learning preferences? How do you approach teaching students of varying aptitudes and levels of interest in the topic? How do you approach teaching non-traditional students? Do you use instructional technology? *If so, why and how?*

**4. How do you measure your effectiveness?** How do you know whether you are meeting your objectives? How can you tell if your students are learning? How do you use student evaluations to develop new strategies for engaging student participation or to meet other objectives? Has your teaching been observed by a faculty member or other evaluator? If so, how did you use the feedback provided to improve your teaching skills? Have you had a class or teaching presentation videotaped? If so, what did you learn from this experience?

The Teaching Philosophy Statement should include **concrete examples** of specific course topics, assignments, assessments, and strategies drawn from courses that you have taught or are or prepared to teach, or from past mentoring and advising experiences. These examples should 1) demonstrate the range of your teaching expertise and 2) illustrate your objectives, methods, and approaches. Compiling a Teaching Portfolio will allow you to flesh out these examples by collecting “supporting documents,” such as syllabi, actual assignments, exams, evaluations, and graded student papers. See [Creating a Teaching Portfolio](#).

## Consider your Audience

When you write your teaching philosophy statement, try to anticipate questions that a search committee would want your statement to answer. Ask your faculty mentors and graduate students who have interviewed for academic positions what they think search committees are looking for;

these individuals are your best sources for learning about the expectations and issues that are particular to your field. Consult the Web site of the school to which you are applying to get a sense of the school's mission and students, and the relative importance of teaching and research within the institution and the department.

Here is a list of potential questions that may be motivating search committees when they ask you to submit a statement of teaching philosophy:

Will this candidate be able to handle the teaching responsibilities of the job? Does her approach to teaching suggest that she would be a good "fit" for our department and our students? Does this candidate want to teach? If so, why? If I were to step into a classroom and observe this candidate teaching, what would I see?

How do this candidate's research interests shape her teaching? What will this candidate add to our department? What will our students gain from his classes? What will our department gain in terms of specific courses, new opportunities for students to develop their skills and knowledge, and interesting pedagogical approaches? How does this candidate respond to the perennial challenges of teaching, such as motivating students to learn, evaluating student work, maintaining high standards in the classroom, and juggling teaching with other responsibilities we expect faculty to fulfill?

The Teaching Philosophy Statement is NOT a summary of the experiences on your CV, nor is it an article on pedagogy. It is a concise, specific discussion of the objectives and approaches you currently use, have used in the past, and plan to use in the future. Keep in mind that search committees are looking for *colleagues*. Reviewing in detail your past experience as a Teaching Assistant, without discussing specific methods or approaches you have developed and used in the classroom, may create

an image of you as a *student* instead of a colleague.

**Formatting Conventions** Limit the length of the final draft to between one and two pages. Again, consider your audience. Steering committees are buried in paper. The more concise your statement can be, the more likely that the members of the committee will read it. A statement submitted for a position at a liberal arts college might be longer and more detailed than a statement that you submit for a position at a research university.

Use the **first person** and, wherever possible, the **present tense**. The exceptions to the latter are the instances in which you are describing what you have done in courses taught in the past and what you will do in courses planned for the future. **Avoid technical jargon**. Your statement may be read by evaluators representing different disciplines and specializations. One of the hallmarks of effective teaching is the ability to explain concepts to audiences who are not experts in the field.

## Strategies for Getting Started

Writing an effective Teaching Philosophy Statement can be a daunting task. Think of the process as a writing project and give yourself some time to explore ideas and try out different ways of expressing those ideas before you write the first draft of the statement. Here are some strategies for more informal, preliminary writing exercises on the topic of teaching: 1. Write a letter addressed to someone outside of academia on the joys and challenges of teaching.

2. Make a list of the qualities of an effective teacher.

3. “Free-write” on a memorable experience in the classroom that you experienced or observed. Consider what went well, what you might do differently, and why.

4. Develop your “dream course.”

What would be your topic?

What would you want to achieve in terms of helping students learn?

How would you try to achieve those objectives?

How would your research interests inform your approach?

5. Imagine yourself in your first academic position.

How will you teach an introductory, undergraduate course in your field?

How will you organize a graduate-level seminar?

How will your research inform your approach in each case?

6. Begin with concrete details.

What sets you apart as a teacher?

How would an observer describe your teaching?

What are the specific skills and knowledge that students should gain in the classroom?

What should happen in the classroom? Why?

What are the teaching methods that you consider most effective? Why?

## Links and Resources

**Sample Statements** You can find Teaching Philosophy Statements on various Web sites, including the University of Georgia site listed below. *CAVEAT: These examples are not presented here as ideal models in terms of either content or writing style.* Not surprisingly, some are more effective than others. However, reviewing these Statements will give you a good idea of the various ways in which others have approached this writing project. *You should strive to create a Teaching Philosophy Statement that is unique and truly reflective of your own approach to teaching.*

“TA Mentors’ Teaching Philosophy Statements.” The Center for Teaching and Learning. The University of Georgia.

[http://wwwctl.uga.edu/teach\\_asst/ta\\_mentors/philosophy/index.html](http://wwwctl.uga.edu/teach_asst/ta_mentors/philosophy/index.html)

Several of the sites below also include sample Statements.

### ***Additional Links and Resources***

Haugen, Lee. "Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement." Center for Teaching Effectiveness. Iowa State University.  
<http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/philosophy.html>

Lang, James M. "4 Steps to a Memorable Teaching Philosophy." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. August 29, 2010. <http://chronicle.com/article/5-Steps-to-a-Memorable/124199/>.

Mangum, Teresa. "Views of the Classroom." *Insider Higher Education*. October 28, 2009.  
[http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/academic\\_career\\_confidential/mangum10..](http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/academic_career_confidential/mangum10..)

Montell, Gabriela. "What's your Philosophy on Teaching, and Does it Matter?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. March 27, 2003.  
<http://chronicle.com/article/Whats-Your-Philosophy-on/45132/>.

Vick, Julie Miller and Jennifer S. Furlong. "Writing Samples and Teaching Statements," Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* Dec. 20, 2010. <http://chronicle.com/article/Writing-SamplesTeaching/125726/>.

Teaching Portfolio [http://ucatsu.edu/teaching\\_portfolio/teaching\\_port.html](http://ucatsu.edu/teaching_portfolio/teaching_port.html)

# Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement

Prepared by Lee Haugen Center for Teaching Excellence, Iowa State University March, 1998

Your philosophy of teaching statement should reflect your personal values and the needs of your students and your department. At the least, you will want to address four primary questions, usually in this order.

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## 1. To What End?

It is important to start by describing where you want to end. In other words, what are your objectives as a teacher? The rest of your philosophy statement should support these objectives which should be achievable and relevant to your teaching responsibilities; avoid vague or overly grandiose statements. On the other hand, you will want to demonstrate that you strive for more than mediocrity or only nuts-and-bolts transference of facts.

You would certainly want your students to learn the fundamental content of the courses you teach. But beyond that, do you hope to foster critical thinking, facilitate the acquisition of life-long learning skills, prepare students to function effectively in an information economy, or develop problem-solving strategies? What is your role in orienting students to a discipline, to what it means to be an educated person in your field? How do you delineate your areas of responsibility as compared to your students' responsibilities? In what specific ways do you want to improve the education of students in your field? Are there discussions in academic journals or in professional organizations about shortcomings in the education of students today or unmet needs in the discipline and do you have

ideas about how to address those shortcomings and needs? If you are going to use teaching in P & T bids, you will probably need to connect to national issues or objectives.

These are questions that will require some thought and you will probably benefit from discussing them with other faculty in your department. Some people can sit down and bang out a paragraph or two in a short time but most of us become more thoughtful about the "big" questions when we bounce them off of our colleagues, consider their responses, re-evaluate our positions, revise, talk some more, etc. Your statement of objectives as a teacher is the most important part of your teaching philosophy and you should take some time with it. And if you take it seriously, you will probably come back to this statement to revise or add to it. Think of it as a work in progress.

## **2. By What Means?**

When you have a clear idea about your teaching objectives, you can discuss methods that you use to achieve or work toward those objectives. Here is where you can display your knowledge of learning theory, cognitive development, curriculum design, etc. You will want to explain specific strategies, techniques, exercises, and include both what you have used in the past and are planning for future courses. You will want to tie these directly to your teaching objectives and discuss how each approach is designed for that purpose.

Discuss how you make decisions about content, resources, and methods. If you include a field trip, what are your learning objectives? If you assemble a collection of readings, how did you decide what to include? How do you decide whether to use collaborative or individual projects? Do you use active learning or student-centered learning principles and why? Relate these decisions and methods to the kinds of classes you teach (large lecture, small discussion, lab, etc.) and make connections to your course objectives.

Again, relate your methods to national-level needs for teaching in your discipline whenever possible. If you have developed instructional materials that have been or could be disseminated, be sure to discuss them. If you have designed or are planning innovative activities, describe how they address specific teaching objectives. Have you presented a paper or a workshop at a professional conference related to your teaching methods?

### 3. To What Degree?

You will need to discuss how you intend to measure your effectiveness vis a vis the objectives and methods you have outlined. Because your objectives are most likely related to student learning, then you will probably use measures of student outcomes to reflect your efforts rather than how many chapters you can cover from the textbook. Student evaluations are always a touchy subject among teachers but in large part that is because teachers have not devised their own assessment methods. Most of us are obligated to use standardized evaluation forms. But that does not prevent us from developing other means that are more directly related to our specific goals and objectives. Teachers who develop their own evaluations usually get more relevant feedback. But in addition, they usually get more positive feedback as well because they are asking the students to reflect on the most important aspects of the course.

If one of your objectives is to develop problem-solving skills, then you will probably want to test your students' ability to solve problems. In that case, discuss how you construct problems for them to solve, what skills those problems are meant to evaluate, and the level of performance that you are seeking. As Ronald Myers, Associate Professor in Veterinary Pathology pointed out in his teaching portfolio: I have come to realize that ultimately students learn what we examine for. If we test for learning of facts, students will learn facts. If we test for problem solving, they will learn to be better problem solvers....My long-term goal is to learn more about and then to implement improved mechanisms for assessment of students, likely in the realm of ability-based or performance-based assessment. There are many resources for improving [assessment](#) and [student evaluations](#) in the [\[CELT\] library](#).

### 4. Why?

Here is where you can be, if not grandiose, at least a bit grand. What, to you, are the great and wonderful rewards of teaching? Why is teaching important? How do you want to make the world or at least higher education better? When you are overworked and feel undervalued, to what ideals do you return in order to rejuvenate yourself and inspire your students? How do you want to make a difference in the lives of your students?

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Center for Teaching Vanderbilt University

# Teaching Statements

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## What is a Teaching Statement?

A Teaching Statement is a purposeful and reflective essay about the author's teaching beliefs and practices. It is an individual narrative that includes not only one's beliefs about the teaching and learning process, but also concrete examples of the ways in which he or she enacts these beliefs in the classroom. At its best, a Teaching Statement gives a clear and unique portrait of the author as a teacher, avoiding generic or empty philosophical statements about teaching.

## What Purposes does the Teaching Statement Serve?

The Teaching Statement can be used for personal, professional, or pedagogical purposes. While Teaching Statements are becoming an increasingly important part of the hiring and tenure processes, they are also effective exercises in helping one clearly and coherently conceptualize his or her approaches to and experiences of teaching and learning. As [Nancy Van Note Chism](#), Professor of Education at IUPUI observes, "The act of taking time to consider one's goals, actions, and vision provides an opportunity for development that can be personally and professionally enriching. Reviewing and revising former statements of teaching philosophy can help teachers to reflect on their growth and renew their dedication to the goals and values that they hold."

# What does a Teaching Statement Include?

A Teaching Statement can address any or all of the following:

*Your* conception of how learning occurs

A description of how *your* teaching facilitates student learning  
A reflection of why *you* teach the way you do

The goals *you* have for yourself and for your students

How *your* teaching enacts your beliefs and goals

What, for *you*, constitutes evidence of student learning

The ways in which *you* create an inclusive learning environment

*Your* interests in new techniques, activities, and types of learning

“If at all possible, your statement should enable the reader to imagine you in the classroom, teaching. You want to include sufficient information for picturing not only you in the process of teaching, but also your class in the process of learning.”

– Helen G. Grundman, *Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement*

## General Guidelines

Make your Teaching Statement **brief** and **well written**. While Teaching Statements are probably longer at the tenure level (i.e. 3-5 pages or more), for hiring purposes they are typically **1-2 pages** in length.

Use **narrative, first-person** approach. This allows the Teaching Statement to be both personal and reflective.

Be **sincere** and unique. Avoid clichés, especially ones about how much passion you have for teaching.

Make it **specific** rather than abstract. Ground your ideas in **1-2 concrete examples**, whether experienced or anticipated. This will help the reader to better visualize you in the classroom.

Be **discipline specific**. Do not ignore your research. Explain how you advance your field through teaching.

**Avoid jargon** and technical terms, as they can be off-putting to some readers. Try not to simply repeat what is in your CV. Teaching Statements are not exhaustive documents and should be used to complement other materials for the hiring or tenure processes.

Be **humble**. Mention students in an enthusiastic, not condescending way, and illustrate your willingness to learn from your students and colleagues.

**Revise**. Teaching is an evolving, reflective process, and Teaching Statements can be adapted and changed as necessary.

## Reflection Questions To Help You Get You Started:\*

Why do you teach the way you do?

What should students expect of you as a teacher?

What is a method of teaching you rely on frequently? Why don't you use a different method?

What do you want students to learn? How do you know your goals for students are being met?

What should your students be able to know or do as a result of taking your class?

How can your teaching facilitate student learning?

How do you as a teacher create an engaging or enriching learning environment?

What specific activities or exercises do you use to engage your students? What do you want your students to learn from these activities?

How has your thinking about teaching changed over time? Why?

\*These questions and exercises are meant to be tools to help you begin reflecting on your beliefs and ideas as a teacher. No single Teaching Statement can contain the answers to all or most of these inquiries and activities.

## Exercises to Help You Get You Started:\*

[The Teaching Portfolio](#), including a section on teaching statements, Duquesne University Center for Teaching Excellence. *This website includes **five** effective exercises to help you begin the writing process*

[Teaching Goals Inventory](#), by Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross and their book *Classroom Assessment Techniques*. *This “quiz” helps you to identify or create your teaching and learning goals.*

[Teaching Perspectives Inventory](#), *This survey can help you collect your thoughts and summarize your ideas about teaching and learning.*

[Articulating your Philosophy of Teaching Statement](#), from the Center for Effective Teaching and Learning at the University of Texas at El Paso. *Various exercises to guide someone in thinking about, articulating, and writing a statement of teaching philosophy.*

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