

Writing a Teaching Statement

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For many job applications, candidates are required to submit a “Teaching Statement” in addition to a vita. A research statement may also be required but this will not be addressed here. I am writing this brief note to a Mathematics graduate student who has been asked to write a Teaching Statement. I have been asked by many such students to help them prepare such a statement and I have read many such statements, both in draft form and from job applicants to our Department. I also wrote my own such statement about ten years ago for an award application. What appears below are some of my own thoughts on this process based on these experiences. A Teaching Statement is sometimes referred to as a “statement of teaching philosophy,” and this description captures the purpose of the statement.

A Teaching Statement should not include a detailed listing of the candidate’s teaching experiences. That belongs in a section in the vita entitled “Teaching Experience”. Fundamentally, in writing a Teaching Statement, you are being asked to describe what you are aiming to achieve in a classroom and how you go about achieving that goal. Since you will be teaching Mathematics, part of the statement should address how you view Mathematics and how that influences what and how you teach.

I urge all writers of Teaching Statements not to look at other such statements prior to writing their own. Once you have read some examples of these statements, your chances of writing something personal are dramatically reduced. It is very easy for a Teaching Statement to look like it was copied from a how-to-teach manual and, as a result, to appear insincere and generic. I encourage the writers of Teaching Statements to think, in big-picture terms, about several questions, which appear below. Each needs to be answered in sufficient generality that the answer will cover all classes the writer may be required to teach. It is always helpful to have done some teaching prior to writing such a statement, as a complete lack of experience makes you ignorant of many of the important issues. In the event that you are called upon to write such a statement having done little or no teaching, my advice is to think in terms of modeling your teaching style after those of your most effective teachers answering these questions from that perspective.

- What is the most important thing I want my students to take from my course?
- How do I view Mathematics and how does this view translate into what and how I teach?
- What general techniques do I use to ensure that my students are able to achieve the target I have set for them for the course?
- Is there a brief personal anecdote that I can include from my own experience that captures the spirit of what I am trying to achieve in the classroom?

The usual length for a Teaching Statement is one page. A prospective employer will not read anything longer, while anything that is too short conveys the impression that the candidate has not thought enough about the whole process of teaching. Your Teaching Statement may address how particular experiences have influenced your current thinking on teaching. It should not consist solely of a description of the procedures you use in the classroom. Nor should it be overloaded with descriptions of specific personal experiences. The Teaching Statement needs to be a skillful blend of what you are trying to achieve and how you go about achieving it. A statement that leans too heavily toward a purely philosophical discussion of teaching does not convince the reader of the writer’s ability to deal with the practicalities of teaching. Your statement also needs to be well written. If you are not a native-English speaker, then you will find your language skills severely tested by this task. It is good to get feedback on what you have written from an experienced mentor. When I act in this role, I am very conscious of not taking over the writing. I try to help the writers to crystallize their ideas and then to express them to accurately reflect their thoughts. Your statement of teaching philosophy should be an honest, deeply

considered document that is a genuine reflection of what you think about a task that will will consume at least half of your working life.