

Writing a Teaching Statement

This note is addressed to a Mathematics graduate student who has been asked to write a Teaching Statement. Almost all academic jobs will require you to teach. Many will require you to do research too. But you'll have preprints and talks and several letters to attest to your research abilities as well as a research statement laying out your future goals. By comparison, you'll probably have just one letter commenting on your classroom performance and even that may not be based on an actual observation of your teaching. In addition, you'll have a cover letter, which you will probably want to tailor to the particular job for which you are applying. You may also have some teaching evaluations; and you'll have a Teaching Statement. This Teaching Statement is your chance to convince a potential employer that, out of the hundreds of applicants, you should be chosen to get a phone call or, even better, an on-campus interview. Your Teaching Statement is your opportunity to transport a potential employer into your class to see you in action, to see what you do and how you do it, and to understand what is driving your actions and your choices. Writing something as compelling as this sounds hard, doesn't it? Is teaching any easier? Do you really want that job?

A Teaching Statement is sometimes referred to as a "statement of teaching philosophy," and this description captures the purpose of the statement. Your Teaching Statement should not include a detailed listing of your teaching experiences. That belongs in a section in your vita entitled "Teaching Experience". Fundamentally, in writing a Teaching Statement, you are being asked to describe what you are aiming to achieve with a class and how you go about achieving these goals. 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 as if it has been copied from a how-to-teach manual and, as a result, to appear generic and insincere. 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. I have deliberately refrained from trying to guide the direction of your writing by being very specific in what I have asked. My hope is that this will result in you producing a more personal and original statement than you otherwise might. In this, as in the research domain, novelty attracts attention.

It is always helpful to have done some teaching prior to writing a Teaching Statement since a complete lack of experience makes you unaware of many of the important issues. In the event that you are called upon to write such

a statement when you have 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 are the most important things I want my students to take from my course?
- What role do the students play in my classroom?
- How do I view the role of Mathematics within a college education, 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 targets I have set for them for the course?
- Is there a brief anecdote that I can include from my own experience that captures the spirit of what I am trying to achieve with a class or why I want to be a Mathematics teacher?

Concerning the last of these, you may not have had an experience that you feel warrants recounting in your Teaching Statement. In that case, do not try to give some minor incident disproportionate weight. It will look contrived and you will damage your credibility.

I take it as axiomatic that you are thoroughly prepared for each class and that you know your subject well. Even in this context, there will be times when you make mistakes or get confused. What lesson will your students learn from how you handle these situations?

When writing your Teaching Statement, be aware that you are not writing up a high school science experiment where you studiously try to remain objective. Instead, you are offering a very personal reflection, and doing this may make you feel uncomfortable as you confront the potential for humiliation. Will you be any less vulnerable when you are teaching?

The usual length of a Teaching Statement is one page. A prospective employer may well not finish something longer, while anything that is too short conveys the impression that you have not thought enough about the whole process of teaching. Every time you teach a class, you have to make a multitude of decisions about what to include and what to omit. In preparing your Teaching Statement, you are faced with a similar array of decisions. If you are unable to prioritize your thoughts on teaching and to condense them into a single page, what does that say about your ability to teach?

In writing your Teaching Statement, it is important to avoid making sweeping assertions about what all good teachers do. Given your lack of teaching experience relative to potential readers of your statement, such pronouncements can easily produce a negative response. Instead, say what it is that you try to do with a class and why you do things this way. A well-justified methodology is unlikely to offend even a reader who does things differently. Your Teaching Statement may address how particular experiences have influenced your current thinking on teaching. It should not consist solely of a description of class procedures. Nor should it be overloaded with accounts of specific personal experiences. Your Teaching Statement needs

to be a skillful blend of **what** you are trying to achieve and **how** you go about achieving those things. A statement that leans too heavily toward a purely philosophical discussion of teaching will not convince the reader of your ability to deal with the practicalities of teaching.

Try to avoid overused sayings, which inevitably grate, or simplistic statements of the obvious. For the latter, suppose we agree that everyone likes apple pie. If I write “my students like apple pie,” a reader learns nothing and, worse still, is potentially insulted. But if I write, “because my students like apple pie, I structure my lesson so that . . .”, then I am saying to the reader that we both recognize my students’ need for apple pie and that I have a plan to address this need.

Your statement should be well written and free of both grammatical and typographical errors. Read it aloud to ensure that it flows smoothly and sounds plausible. Because writing your Teaching Statement will severely test your language skills, particularly if English is not your first language, I recommend getting feedback from an experienced mentor as you progress through what may be several drafts. When I act in this role, I am very conscious of not taking over the writing. Rather, I try to help the writers to crystallize their ideas and then to express them clearly.

While readers of your statement may only scan it, they are likely to look at the beginning and the end, so you should pay particular attention to ensuring that each of these contains a strong, succinct summary of your teaching philosophy. Overall, you are trying to project yourself through your statement into the room with the reader. Your Teaching Statement should be an honest, deeply considered document that is a genuine reflection of what you think about a task that will consume at least half of your working life; and it should convey to the reader a powerful sense of what it is like to be one of your students.

Alternative approaches

Helen Grundman has written a very concrete guide [1] to preparing a Teaching Statement that includes a number of exercises designed to help with this task. Indeed, her first exercise asks a number of questions that are very similar to the bullet-point questions I have asked above. Moreover, she and I agree on the importance of originality in your statement. As she says, “Try to make your teaching philosophy statement unique to you.” But we have some basic disagreements on how to achieve this aim. She gives some very specific suggestions of common teaching goals, and she advocates having discussions with peers in addition to reading 15–25 Teaching Statements of others. This approach exposes you to a broad range of thoughts and then asks you to prioritize these, incorporating the most important ones into your own statement. Some readers may find this approach preferable to the one I have suggested above. Both approaches require prolonged consideration of what you try to do in the classroom and how you try to do it.

Gabriela Montell talked to dozens of professors and administrators to learn what they look for in a statement of teaching philosophy, and she summarized her findings in an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* [3]. Her article is not aimed specifically at mathematicians, but most of its advice is universal. One point where a mathematician may depart from the advice given in her article relates to varying your Teaching Statement for different types of teaching institutions. I feel that the main principles of your teaching philosophy should be sufficiently robust that they encompass all of the environments in which you will be asked to teach. Specific demands of particular institutions can be addressed in your cover letter. Reading Montell's article will not unduly harm your ability to maintain a unique perspective and will probably help you to write a better Teaching Statement particularly if you heed the advice that heads her last section "Just be yourself."

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References

- [1] Grundman, Helen G., Writing a teaching philosophy statement, *Notices Amer. Math. Soc.* **53** (2006), 1329–1333.
- [2] Halmos, P. R., How to write mathematics, *Enseignement Math. (2)* **16** (1970), 123–152.
- [3] Montell, Gabriela, How to write a statement of teaching philosophy, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 27, 2003 <<http://chronicle.com/article/How-to-Write-a-Statement-of/45133>>.

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