

TWENTY-FIVE

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 meatpackers, 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.