

Faculty Application Packet: Teaching Statement

Advice from Prof. Jillian Goldfarb, Cornell University (and friends...)

The teaching statement is a required document for any faculty application. It helps the search committee to understand who you will be in the classroom, and if your vision of teaching aligns with that of the Department/University.

Goal of the Teaching Statement

1. Convince the search committee and department faculty that you are ready and qualified to be a professor in the classroom. Show them that you don't need a lot of hand-holding to enter the classroom on Day 1.
2. Demonstrate to the hard-core teachers on the faculty – the pedagogical experts – that you've actually thought about teaching and how your teaching aligns with a position. Get these people excited about mentoring you and helping you grow as a teacher.

Format and Style

There is no one prescribed style, and in 2-3 pages (no more – some limit to 2 pgs!) you can't go too crazy with headers and sections. Personally, I use a few bold sentence-style headers to break up different components to help the reader.

First and foremost... DO NOT start your statement with something as trite as "I am passionate about teaching." This is about YOU and who YOU are... be concise and be specific. Build your "brand."

Through your Statement, you should provide answers to the following questions.

1. What is your teaching philosophy? (How do you think about teaching?) Here are things to work into this part of the statement – which should be about 40-50% of total statement.
 - a. What is your general approach to the classroom? Do you favor active learning, group problem solving, lecture then practice, project-based, team-based, etc. What underpins this approach from your own experience? Be specific with examples – not just "I use an active learning approach," but what elements of active learning will you incorporate?
 - b. What do you feel makes for a fair, equitable and fruitful classroom experience for all students? How will you make all learners – of all levels, abilities and background – feel welcome in your classroom? (This is the classroom climate.)
 - c. How do you develop your learning outcomes? (Note learning outcomes and knowledge are NOT the same thing... do not conflate! How do you plan to assess student learning?)
 - d. Do NOT reinvent the wheel completely. Draw from the literature (lightly) and your own experience to show what approach will make you an effective teacher.
 - e. How will you teach/mentor outside the classroom? For a course, are office hours/recitations important? How will you approach undergraduate advising?
 - f. What's your mentoring style? Create a vision of how students will talk about you when you're not around. What words do they use? What actions do they remember?
2. How do your prior teaching experiences prepare you for the classroom? This is about 20-30% of statement, though you may wish to weave this together with #1 for a better flow.
 - a. Note... this does not say "What are your prior teaching experiences." Rather, it asks you to describe your level of preparedness (and challenges you foresee) and use your prior experience to demonstrate why you are prepared to undertake this endeavor. Use specific examples to make your points.
 - b. Do not list everything you've ever done in the classroom. Highlight important/key experiences, especially those that show your independence and how you've formulated your own ideas about teaching. This is not a list, it's prose!

- c. At the same time, be quantitative when possible. You TA'ed Class XYZ 3 years in a row and taught independent lectures twice each year? Good, add that, and now tell us how this experience informed your teaching philosophy.
3. What courses are you interested in teaching? This should be about 20-30% of the total document. It's important to show that you align with the needs of the Department.
 - a. Yes, this may mean having several different statements depending on the program/department to which you're applying. In general, it's good to have at least 1-2 core undergraduate courses in your field, 1 undergraduate elective, and 1-2 graduate courses (if appropriate).
 - b. What about each course interests you? Don't simply give a list of courses. Rather, for each course, name one "thing" about it that interests you. For example, if your research relies heavily on chemical reactions and kinetics, you might want to teach Reaction Engineering. Explain the link between your in-depth knowledge developed for your research and how you can help students understand the course by giving concrete examples of its utility in your work.
 - c. About half of this section should be devoted to describing one new course that you would develop for the department. You should propose a new course that brings your specific expertise/interest (research or otherwise) into the classroom. What course do you wish you had when you were an upper level undergrad or PhD student? NEVER, ever, propose to develop a course that already exists. Yes... this means you have to check each curriculum at least quickly. This would be embarrassing and show you don't really have an interest in the job.
 - d. To stand out (for a job you really want!) take the time to analyze the curriculum at the institution to which you're applying. Is the approach new (or different than what you've seen), which makes you want to work there for a specific reason? Or does the curriculum seem to have a gap that your proposed course(s) can fill? Give concrete suggestions or examples, but be flexible. Use hedging words like "I am prepared/willing to teach..." You never know if a Department website is stagnant and perhaps a course you say you "will" teach already exists and worse, has a longstanding faculty member teaching it!

How can you differentiate yourself with your teaching statement?

- Integrate your research approach, expertise and goals. Do you have an approach to research (e.g. building on fundamentals) can you apply that to your teaching?
- Subtly use the teaching statement as a way to show off and highlight other parts of your application. For example, if you had a great mentor who helped you write a funded grant proposal, maybe you'll talk about what that experience did for you (the grant writing process and the grant), what you took away from it that's important to you as a mentor going forward, and how you think you can help your own advisees. What might you do differently?
- Do NOT (EVER) say anything negative about a student, fellow grad student, mentor, advisor, colleague (anyone). This should NEVER be "I can do it better than so-and-so" or "I saw what didn't work and want to fix it." NO. You want everything to be positive, but show that you took can grow your experience. Maybe you've seen things that don't work overall and have ideas on how to improve. Or you want to use a different approach in your own teaching because something didn't work for you. Do not ever place blame or be negative on someone, even subtly.
- It's okay if you don't have a lot of teaching experience. Use what you do have, and use your experience as a student and mentee to craft an "I will" theme. Remember, the point of the statement is to show who you will be in the classroom at the institution to which you're applying. Even for seasoned veterans like me, I'm always rethinking my approach to teaching, and tuning my pedagogy and assumptions every year.