

The Professor Is In



The Dreaded Teaching Statement: Eight Pitfalls

Posted on September 16, 2011 by Karen

Here at The Professor Is In we have reached the point in the Fall 2011 job market season in which many of our clients have finished work on their job letters and their c.v.s—and damn, do they look good!—and have moved on to their teaching statements.

And once again, I am struck by how many really brilliant and talented young scholars, including those who are otherwise terrific writers, fall flat on their faces in their teaching statements. It's just painful. The teaching statement first drafts are, by and large, simply excruciating to read.

Apparently these things are just brutal to write.

But why?

I think there are several reasons, actually. A partial, speculative list would include these:

- The audience and its expectations are unclear
- The genre is rarely explained
- The genre allows for great variation, with few obvious parameters for length and tone
- The expected content at first blush seems overly “obvious” and rote (ie, “I am passionate about teaching”)
- Feelings about teaching are often intense and hard to articulate in academic prose.

The mistakes that teaching statement writers make seem to fall into fairly consistent patterns that derive

from the confusions and mystifications listed above. In this post I am going to identify the major pitfalls of the worst teaching statements, and offer suggestions to guide you as you craft your own.

Error #1: It is too long

There are fewer hard and fast rules of teaching statements than there are for things like c.v.s and cover letters. So, there may be scholars and departments and search committees that have no problem with lengthy ones. But it is the official position of Dr. Karen that a teaching statement should be no longer than one page.

The reason is that a teaching statement is always a subsidiary document to a larger job application, which already includes a job letter, a c.v., references, and possibly a writing sample. It is simply not realistic or reasonable to expect the search committee to wade through a 3 page single-spaced teaching statement on top of all of that. While some dedicated individuals might, the vast majority will not. So, be your own best advocate, and make your statement as easy as possible to digest.

Believe me, everything you actually NEED to say in a teaching statement can be easily said in one page.

And while we're on the subject, I don't mean one page in 11pt font with 1/2" margins either. I mean one page with nice, creamy one inch wide margins on all sides, and a nice legible 12 pt font that is easy on middle-aged eyes.

It is one of the principles I try to inculcate in my TPII work, that white space on a page communicates expansiveness and confidence. Line upon line of miniscule font, crammed up to the edges of the paper, by contrast, communicates insecurity and desperation.

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.

Error #2: You tell a story instead of making statements supported by evidence.

This is probably the single most common pitfall of the teaching statement. For some reason candidates think that the genre requires the "story of my teaching life." Ie, "I always like to use multi-media materials in the classroom. I first discovered the value of these when I taught 'Introduction to Cultural Anthropology' at the Eastern 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.”

I’ll bet some of you reading this post think that the above is totally great. It isn’t. It’s rambly and utterly enmeshed in the single greatest principle of bad writing, which is that it Tells, when it needs to Show.

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. Now I dislike that term, because I think it encourages writers to be even more woey and tell-y than otherwise, but it does point to one major goal: 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

The most important point here is that you provide evidence that SHOWS (rather than tells) how you teach. This does not mean teaching evals or numerical outcomes per se, but rather that you describe a course, a specific teaching strategy that you used and why, what the outcomes were, and feedback from students that was illuminating.

Error #3: You express sentiments that are saccharine, obvious and indistinguishable from countless other applicants.

Now, following up on error #2, is the concurrent problem that all too often, the “wide general good” that writers fall back on is some tired old blahdedy blah about “encouraging discussion,” and “promoting a variety of viewpoints,” and “using a variety of multimedia materials,” and “caring passionately about learning,” and “creating engaged learners,” and blah, blah, blah.

I want to say very bluntly: do you understand that the search committee is reading something like 200 of these? And do you realize that of those 200, approximately 185 are going to say that the writer “cares passionately about teaching,” “uses a variety of multimedia materials,” “promotes discussion” and “strives to educate students for the 21st century/information society”?

Seriously, do you really think those sentiments are original at this point in time?

They aren't.

The sentiments you express in your statement cannot be saccharine or hackneyed or obvious. You actually need to think about this as a profoundly original endeavor, that springs from deeply held beliefs that are unique to you, coming from your particular life experiences, and that are not going to be automatically shared by others. Then you need to give actual examples from classes that you have taught, examples that are not painfully obvious (ex: "I use small group discussions!") but rather truly vivid and memorable (ex: "I assigned mini-ethnographies of the local meat-packing district and then students shared these in a student symposium in the last week of term"). You must give at least one example that your readers will likely be able to say of, later, "oh yeah...she's that one who assigns the mini-ethnographies of the meat-packers, right?"

Error #4: You mis-read 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, at the highest level, are consistent with the mission of the institution. If it is a SLAC, then you'll want to emphasize your passion for and successes in teaching small, intimate classes. If it is a giant land-grant comprehensive, then you'll be best served by describing your enjoyment of and exceptional success in using innovative methods to teach a lecture course of 300 students.

Error #5: You are excessively humble, especially if you are female

Language such as

"I was honored to have the opportunity to be entrusted with the core seminar in xxxx,"

"I was fortunate to be selected for the award in xxx,"

"I hope that my methods will encourage students to..."

"I am always striving to improve my skills and seek training in new methods..."

may seem charming and engaged, but it is in fact overly-submissive and self-sabotaging. At the tenure track job search level, search committees are looking for powerful and accomplished professionals in the

classroom. It is not an “honor” and a “privilege” to teach—it is a basic responsibility of a scholarly job. Speak of it as such.

Error #6: You are excessively emotional, especially if you are female.

Language such as

“I am delighted when students tell me...”

“I would be thrilled to teach your course in xxx...”

“I am so excited to use new materials...”

“It would be a great pleasure to create new courses...”

“I can’t say enough about how much I enjoy...”

may seem friendly and engaged, but it is actually overly-emotional and highly feminized in ways that, again, are self-sabotaging on the tenure track job market.

Women in particular must beware of their tendency to over-invest in a “nice” persona in their teaching statements. Teaching at the tenure track level is not about being nice. It is about being a professional.

Realize that the “nicer” and “sweeter” you sound, the more you are characterizing yourself as the classic female perennial one-year replacement adjunct.

Those who are competitive in the tenure track market, by contrast, articulate a teaching persona that is completely consistent with their researcher persona: serious, intellectually hard-hitting, disciplinarily cutting edge, demanding, and with high standards and expectations.

Error #7: You fail to link your research and teaching into a single consistent whole.

In [my previous post on the job cover letter](#), I introduced the sentence, “The same commitment to xxx that propels my research also inspires my teaching.”

This sentence sums up the appropriate attitude with which to approach a teaching statement. 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, innovative, and original in the classroom as you are in your research and writing. The connections between these personae should be utterly seamless. If you are dedicated to new approaches to medieval manuscripts in your research, then show us how you use medieval manuscript copies in your classroom to instruct students in paleographic methods. If you are dedicated to critiquing new U.S. ideologies of adolescence and capital in your research, then show how you have students deconstruct specific episodes of “The Suite Life of Zach and Cody on Deck.” 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.

Error #8: You don’t have a Conclusion

All professional documents should conclude with a broad and expansive gesture toward the wider import of your work. Dribbling off with a line like, “And I received positive feedback for that class” is painfully deflating to read. End on a strong note! An example might be: “In sum, all of my pedagogical strategies are dedicated to teaching the principles of humanistic research in dynamic, hands-on 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.”

In sum (!) your teaching statement should be:

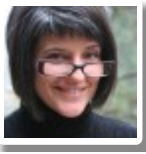
- short
- evidence based
- distinctive and memorable
- appropriately tailored
- confident
- factual, not emotional
- consistent with your scholarly persona
- wrapped up with a conclusion.

Good luck!

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About Karen

I am a former tenured professor at two institutions--University of Oregon and University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. I have trained numerous Ph.D. students, now gainfully employed in academia, and handled a number of successful tenure cases as Department Head. I've created this business, The Professor Is In, to guide graduate students and junior faculty through grad school, the job search, and tenure. I am the advisor they should already have, but probably don't.

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Melissa

on [September 16, 2011 at 7:13 am](#) said:

giggle Hey! I resemble those remarks!

Thanks, Karen.

It's a challenge to change my focus from my subject matter, and how passionate I am about it, to the results I get in the classroom. It's a great point.

Digger

