



Quick Tips: Developing Your Teaching Philosophy

Having just survived another academic year, you may find yourself with enough spare time to plan ahead just a little and think about your goals and purposes.

While flexible time may still not be plentiful, it is usually easier to find in the summer and you may find yourself becoming a bit more reflective about your teaching as well as your research. If you anticipate becoming a faculty member in the next year or two, you may want to begin now to reflect seriously on your teaching philosophy.

As teaching skill becomes a more important criterion in academic job searches, an increasing number of institutions ask candidates to submit a "statement of teaching philosophy" or "teaching statement" as part of their application. Statements of teaching philosophy are also a common component of the teaching portfolios that over 200 institutions now use in evaluating their faculty. Here are a few pieces of advice for beginning the process of developing and writing your teaching philosophy.

Tips for developing and writing your teaching philosophy:

- Keep it short.
- Be concrete .
- Whenever possible, be discipline specific.
- Read widely enough to frame your views wisely.
- Reflect carefully on your experience as a student and instructor.
- Make it unique to you.
- Know your audience well enough to avoid big risks.

Keep it short.

Search committees read hundreds of applications for most tenure-track positions, so your goal is a concise 1-2 page statement organized around at most 1-2 main ideas. The challenge is to be specific and vivid enough to say something important about your teaching which can be conveyed in that space.

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Be concrete .

Sometimes the goal of stating their "philosophy" leads people to adopt an abstract writing style which states only general principles. Some faculty on search committees distrust such abstract statements because they tend to sound somewhat naive. Some will question any ideas which do not seem to be grounded in teaching experience. If you include brief examples of how your approach plays out in your courses, you help readers to visualize your teaching style and see the depth of your convictions.

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Whenever possible, be discipline specific.

While many teaching strategies transcend disciplinary boundaries, most faculty members serving on search or evaluation committees view teaching as more skillful when it is adapted to the demands of the specific discipline or course material. To strengthen your understanding of the course-specific or discipline-specific teaching issues, talk with faculty and TAs whose teaching you respect. You might also want to skim pedagogical journals in your fields.

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Read widely enough to frame your views wisely.

A statement of teaching philosophy should not be laden with educational terms or jargon, but it should reflect a good understanding of the issues in teaching your particular discipline as well as issues specific to particular groups of students. If you don't have much teaching or TA experience to draw on, reading can help you put your views in context. Three great general references are:

- *Teaching Tips* by McKeachie
- *Tools for Teaching* by B.G. Davis
- *The New Professor's Handbook* by Davidson and Ambrose

Complete citations are in the [Bibliography](#) section of this Web site.

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Reflect carefully on your experience as a student and instructor.

Consider both your positive role models and those instructors whose mistakes you swore you would never repeat. What are the underlying priorities or values which you have drawn from these experiences? You may not want to write about these models in your statement, but analyzing these experiences is useful to pinpoint the ideals which truly are most important to you and why.

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Make it unique to you.

The statement of teaching philosophy is a rare opportunity to express something about who you are that people will remember. The uniqueness can come from your original perspective on teaching issues, an interesting organizing theme, or simply an engaging or elegant writing style.

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Know your audience well enough to avoid big risks.

The statement of teaching philosophy helps faculty members see how you fit into the culture of their educational program. For many teaching-oriented institutions, descriptions of creative or innovative teaching will be viewed most positively. At other schools, the criteria for excellence may have more to do with demonstrating how skillfully you can deal with mainstream teaching tasks in the discipline.

Be sure you share your draft with others to make sure you don't inadvertently come across as controversial or misunderstand the teaching expectations in a different institutional culture.

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