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# Guide to Preparing Teaching Statements and Dossiers:

## For Graduate Students and Teaching Assistants

Are you a graduate student intent on pursuing an academic career? If so, you will be required to prepare a teaching dossier for job applications. In order to prepare all of the components for an excellent dossier, you need to begin building, developing, and gathering evidence about your teaching from the very beginning of your graduate degree. This guide provides easy to follow steps that you can use over the course of your degree as you develop your teaching dossier.



Are you a graduate student intent on pursuing an academic career? If so, you will be required to prepare a teaching dossier for job applications. In order to prepare all of the components for an excellent dossier, you need to begin building, developing, and gathering evidence about your teaching from the very beginning of your graduate degree. The typical teaching trajectory for graduate students at the post-secondary level begins when they are appointed as teaching assistants (TAs). However, due to different variables, some graduate students may not have the chance to be a TA. If this is your situation, then you will need to seek out opportunities to gain teaching experience, such as being a guest lecturer or volunteer teacher. Even if you do not have the opportunity to obtain a lot of practical teaching experience during your graduate degree, you can still begin to develop your teaching identity and constructing your dossier. By beginning to prepare your dossier early it will be ready for other purposes, such as applying for TA awards or other forms of recognition that occur as you complete your degree.

This guide begins with information, thought-provoking questions, and exercises to assist you in developing your teaching identity so that you can eventually confidently write the most important part of the dossier — the teaching statement. It then moves onto discussion of the different components that you can begin gathering for your dossier in easy to follow steps. First, read through the whole document and then return to Step 1 to begin.

## What is a teaching dossier?

A teaching dossier...

- is sometimes called a portfolio, which contains documentation about your experience as an instructor (this means as a teaching assistant (TA), guest lecturer, or other instructional roles, such as a being a volunteer instructor or organizing experiential learning in the community).
- begins with a teaching statement (described below) that includes your teaching goals, claims, and strategies.
- is the compendium of all of your evidence (in appendices) to support your teaching statement (see below for details about what to include in a teaching dossier).
- is not the place to list all of the teaching you have ever done (do not repeat what is in your curriculum vitae).

There are many components that can be included in a teaching dossier, but the most important is the teaching statement. However, it can be difficult to write reflectively about your approach to teaching when you have had limited teaching experience. Step 1 will help you begin to develop your teaching identity even before you begin experiencing the different aspects of teaching.

## **STEP 1: Being reflective**

The first step is to think about who you will become as a teacher in higher education (as a teaching assistant and/or guest lecturer now, and as an instructor in the future). To begin this process, reflect on your responses to the following questions:

1. What characteristics do you admire in instructors?
2. What effective teaching strategies can you recall from your own learning experiences (either formally in school or informally in other learning situations, such as extracurricular activities)?
3. What skills do you bring to teaching from other work experience?
4. What do you think is important about the teaching role?
5. What do you aspire to do when you take on teaching responsibilities?
6. What do you want to get out of teaching?
7. What metaphor would you use to describe learning and teaching?
8. What do you think are important characteristics in students? Why are these important to you?
9. What if a student does not have one of these characteristics? How will that affect your interactions with them?

Use these reflections to begin the process of developing your teacher identity. The approach you take to the different strategies that you use in your teaching will be strongly influenced by your personal values and beliefs. Make sure you clearly articulate what is important to you before you engage in your work as a teaching assistant or guest lecturer. This will help you frame your interactions with students, understand why you choose certain teaching methods, and inform your approach to grading and assessment. It is important to be continuously reflective about your work as an instructor. As well, consider investigating publications about different teaching theories that may help you define your approach to teaching (see *Suggested Readings* below).

## **STEP 2: Preparing to write the teaching statement**

Next, you want to take what you discovered in Step 1 and begin developing those thoughts into a teaching statement. What is a teaching statement? The teaching statement (sometimes referred to as a teaching narrative or philosophy) is a reflective piece of writing that triangulates what the instructor intends in his or her student-centered teaching with evidence from colleagues and

students that supports those intentions (typically one to two pages in length). As you begin your teaching assistant or guest lecturer assignment and developing your teaching statement, remember the following:

- gather evidence to back up your claims in your statement;
- clearly define terms and concepts;
- remember that the focus is on student learning;
- be authentic and make sure the teaching statement reflects you and your experience;
- seek feedback from colleagues and others often on your teaching statement; and
- that the teaching statement is a living document and will change continuously.

### **Determine the essential topics to address in a teaching statement<sup>1</sup>**

There are four main topics that you want to make sure you can authentically speak to: learning goals, teaching methods, assessment of student learning, and assessment of teaching. Underlying these main topics are the ideas that everyone holds based on their own values and experiences with learning.

Learning goals refer to the specific disciplinary concepts and skills that you want students to attain. As you think about learning goals, consider your response to the following questions:

- What do you find most interesting about your discipline?
- What knowledge, skills, and abilities are important for student success in your discipline?

Teaching Methods refer to any actions you take in your duties as a TA or instructor, including grading, during office hours, and in the classroom. Consider the following questions as you think about the methods you will employ in your work:

- What do you feel are the respective responsibilities of the student and the teacher?
- How are these relationships and responsibilities reflected in the methods you use to teach, grade, or other methods?
- How do these methods contribute to your learning goals for students?
- Why are these teaching methods appropriate for use in your discipline?
- What pedagogical resources (disciplinary and general) support your teaching methods?
- How are your teaching methods attentive to diverse student expectations and needs?

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Kearns, K. D., & Sullivan, C. S. (2011). Resources and practices to help graduate students and postdoctoral fellows write statements of teaching philosophy. *Advances in Physical Education* 35, 136-145. doi: 10.1152/advan.00123.2010

- How do your personal characteristics and values relate to your choice and implementation of your teaching methods?

Assessment of student learning refers to the task of finding out if students have attained the learning objectives/outcomes of the course and/or lesson. Assessment is not restricted to activities that are graded. Formative assessment (ungraded forms of assessment or those that carry a very small grade) should occur continuously in the classroom and prepare students for summative (graded) assessment.

- Do you use or develop learning objectives for each class session (or are they provided for you)? Are these based on the overall learning objectives of the course?
- What learning assessment tools do you use (e.g., tests, papers, portfolios, and/or journals) and why?
- What formative assessments do you use in class (e.g., questions, small quizzes, feedback from students at the end of class)?
- How do you know that the learning goals are being achieved using your teaching methods?
- What do the learning assessments say about your teaching?

Assessment of teaching is not often built into the teaching assistant or guest lecturer experience. Therefore, it is up to you to make sure that you put into place strategies to gather evidence of your teaching methodologies. Remember that it is important to show development and change as you become an instructor.

- Are you requesting early, mid-, and final feedback from students?<sup>2</sup>
- What do your teaching assessments say about your teaching?
- What are your strengths as a teacher?
- How will you improve students' achievement of these learning goals?
- What aspects of your teaching are you working on now?

Your goal is to be able to triangulate your evidence. For each of your claims, aim to have supporting evidence from three sources: yourself, peers and colleagues, and students (ideas of the types of evidence you can gather are stated below). This is very important because it will demonstrate that you act on what you say. A fault with some teaching statements is that the individual states that he or she strongly believes in a certain thing but there is no way to concretely know if that is what the person actually does. By providing evidence and especially multiple forms to back up a claim, the reader of the statement can confidently agree that the teaching claims are true.

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<sup>2</sup> See, Korpan, C. (2011). *Formative Feedback for Teaching Assistants (TAs) at UVic*, for several ways to attain feedback about your work as a TA.

### STEP 3: Prompts to help you write your teaching statement<sup>3</sup>

There are different ways that you can approach writing the first draft of your teaching statement based on your level of experience. Try one or all of the suggestions provided below.

Title	Description
Teaching beliefs, practices, and goals	Consider your beliefs, practices, and future goals in relation to several aspects of teaching: who the learners are, the student-student and student-teacher relationships, the knowledge and skills needed in the field, the methods to impart the knowledge and skills, and the evidence that students are learning.
Self-reflective interview exercise	In a creative writing exercise, imagine that you are being interviewed for a magazine article about effective teachers. The following are examples of questions you might address: How does your teaching reflect the best teacher you have ever known? If you wrote a book about teaching, what would be title be? What three points about instruction would you make?
The metaphor	Establish a metaphor in the opening paragraph. The rest of your statement should incorporate descriptions that reflect how you will strive to have your teaching relate to this metaphor. Pay attention to each phase of the teaching/learning cycle (learning goals, teaching methods, learning assessment, and teaching assessment).
Five-paragraph essay	In the first paragraph, establish the thesis or argument about your teaching effectiveness: How would you characterize your teaching? What is important for students to take away from your classes? In three subsequent paragraphs, describe specific teaching moments that illustrate this thesis, paying attention to each phase of the teaching/learning cycle: learning goals, teaching methods, learning assessment, and teaching assessment. In the final paragraph, analyze your overall teaching effectiveness and propose future teaching developments.
Great moments	Think about a moment in your classroom when you and the students were having a great time. Write about that “great moment” using the following series of questions: What was the topic and activity during which this great moment happened? What was the goal of

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Kearns, K. D., & Sullivan, C. S. (2011). Resources and practices to help graduate students and postdoctoral fellows write statements of teaching philosophy. *Advances in Physical Education* 35, 136-145. doi: 10.1152/advan.00123.2010

	<p>the activity? How did you structure the activity? What did students do during the activity? How could you demonstrate that the activity resulted in significant student learning? How does this great moment exemplify what you value about your discipline and your personal and instructional style?</p>
Great and not-so-great moments	<p>In addition to writing about a “great moment,” write about a moment when you were not satisfied about how a class went. What was the topic and activity during which this not-so-great moment happened? What was the goal of the activity? How did you structure the activity? What did students do during the activity? Why was this activity a not-so-great moment? Rather than thinking about this event as an anomaly, think about why similar teaching strategies would work in one instance and not in another instance. How do both the great moment and not-so-great moment exemplify what you value about your discipline and your personal and instructional style?</p>
The story	<p>Usually featured as the first paragraph of the statement, “the story” refers to a pivotal moment, either in your own learning or in your teaching. The story could also be about your life before you came to graduate school. The rest of your statement should incorporate descriptions of specific teaching moments that reflect how your teaching has been influenced in specific ways by that event or career and that pay attention to each phase of the teaching/learning cycle (learning goals, teaching methods, learning assessment, and teaching assessment).</p>
The teaching cube	<p>Describe the following six facets of your teaching (<a href="#">adapted by Gail Goodyear, Centre for Effective Teaching and Learning, University of Texas</a>):</p> <p>Learn – What motivates you to learn in this discipline? Why have you chosen your discipline?</p> <p>Act – What happens when you teach? What do you do?</p> <p>Difference – Why does what you do in your teaching make a difference in the lives of others? Why is it relevant?</p> <p>Values – What values do you impart to your students and why?</p> <p>Setting – Why do you develop the learning environments and relationships with students that you do?</p> <p>Enjoy – What are your favourite statements to make about teaching? Why are they your favourites?</p>

#### **STEP 4: Revisions, feedback, and edits**

The teaching statement is usually structured to begin with an introductory statement about your beliefs and claims that leads to specific examples that back up those claims. It concludes with future goals and highlights the main teaching claims again and how these claims support student learning.

Once you have revised the statement to be no more than two pages, you are ready to gather feedback. You can do this in a series of steps or send out to colleagues all at once. Consider sending to colleagues and instructors, not only within your field, but from other fields as well to help get a broad range of feedback. Ask reviewers to consider clarity, strength of claims and supporting evidence, and tone. Remember that you do not have to act on every piece of feedback you receive, but do pay careful attention to repeated concerns or identified areas that need improvement. You can also seek feedback from the Learning and Teaching Centre by contacting Cynthia Korpan, LTC Professional Development Program and TA Training manager.

#### **STEP 5: Organize your evidence into the dossier**

The following information is to assist you with developing the elements required for your teaching dossier. Most, if not all, of the elements are recommended to be developed over your time in graduate school. The teaching dossier is an important component of any application if you will be pursuing an academic career.

The elements are divided into source groupings: from you, from colleagues, and from students. Each grouping illustrated below (Figures 1, 2, and 3) gives ideas of the type of elements you can gather from the varied sources, with your aim being to gather evidence from all resources. This is not an exhaustive list; consider adding anything that you deem essential in representing your development as a teacher.

Remember that even if you do not have an original syllabus (or any other element listed below), you can include a draft syllabus of a course that you would like to design in the future. This shows engagement, initiative, and excellent future planning.

Wishing you much success!



***From You***

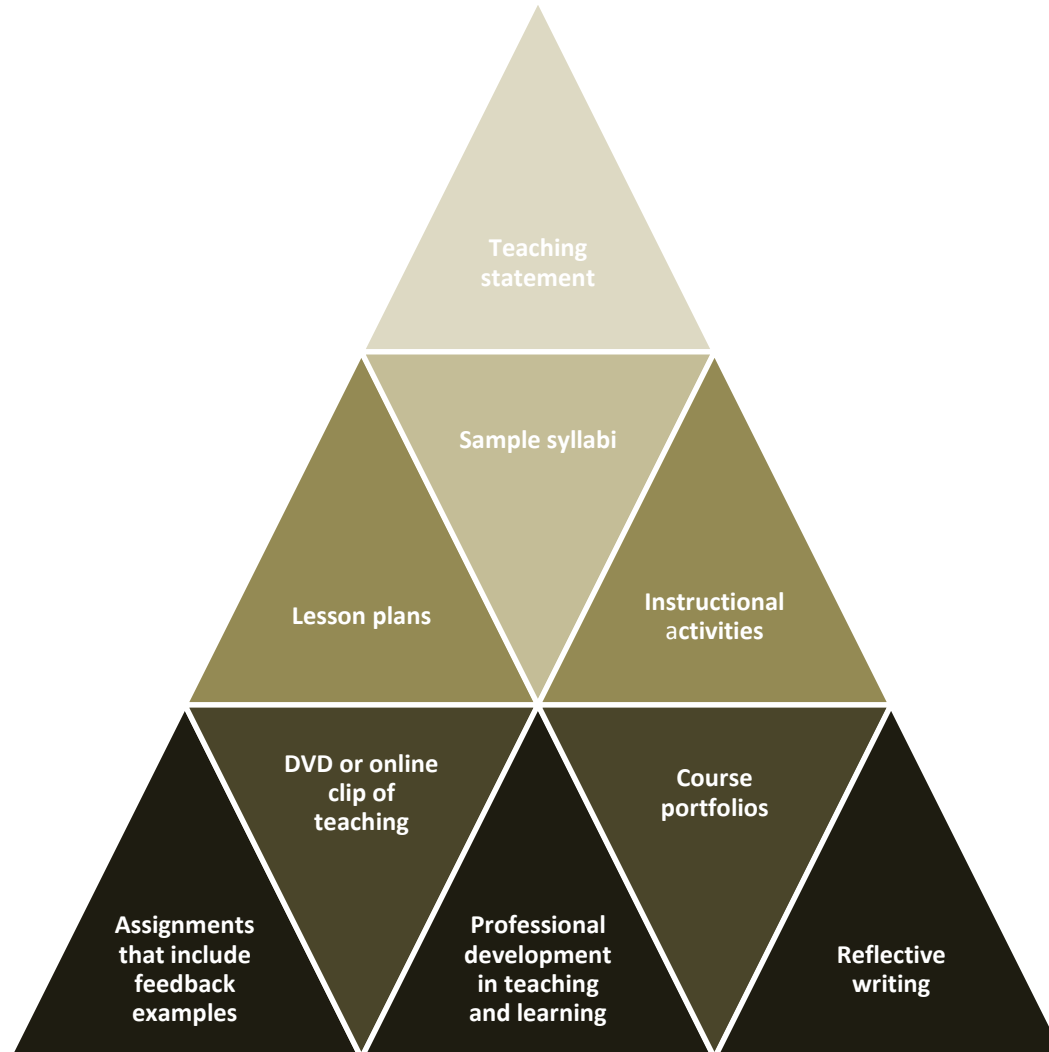


Figure 1: From you

***From Colleagues***

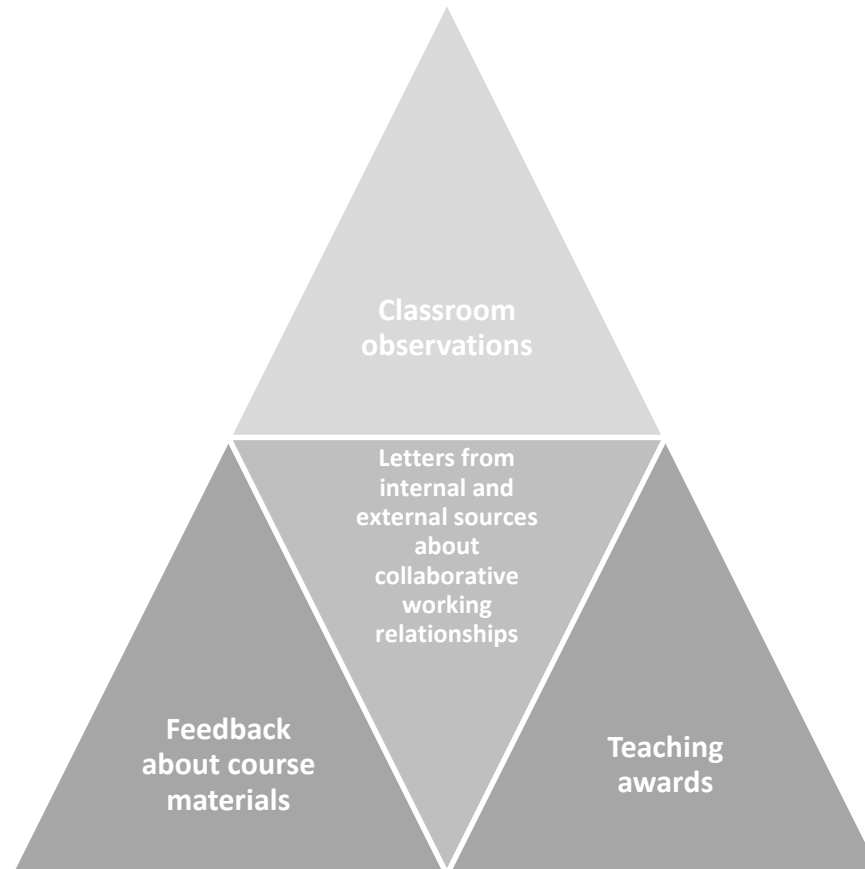


Figure 2: From Colleagues

### ***From Students***

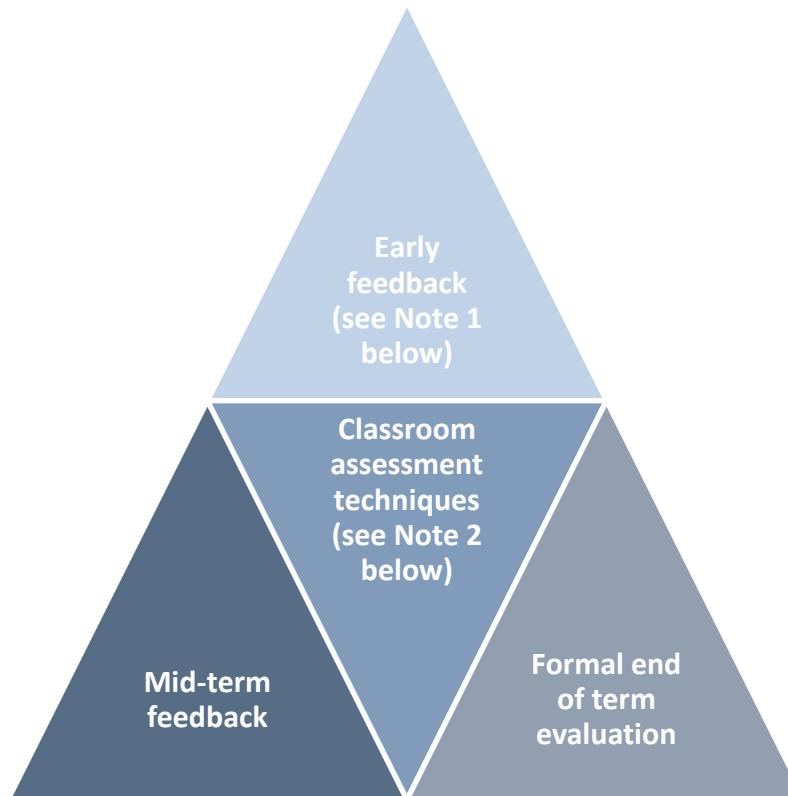


Figure 3: From Students

Note 1: See, Korpan, C. (2011), *Formative Feedback for Teaching Assistants (TAs) at UVic*, for several ways to attain feedback about your work as a TA.

Note 2: See, Angelo, T. A., & Cross, P.K. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, for ideas on how to get feedback from students after any class session.

## Suggested Readings

The following is only a small sample of books that may help you frame your approach to teaching. These can be a beginning to explore different theories that appeal to you further.

Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. Jossey-Bass.

Illeris, K. (Ed.) (2009). *Contemporary theories of learning: Learning theorists in their own words*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Jarvis, P. (2006). *The Theory and Practice of Teaching*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Adapted from:

Dawson, T. (2007). Teaching dossiers: A guide for faculty. *Learning and Teaching Centre*, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC.

Ellis, D. & Griffin, G. (2000). Developing a teaching philosophy statement: A special challenge for graduate students. *Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development* 7(1), 85-92.

Kearns, K. D., & Sullivan, C. S. (2011). Resources and practices to help graduate students and postdoctoral fellows write statements of teaching philosophy. *Advances in Physical Education* 35, 136-145. doi: 10.1152/advan.00123.2010.

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