

## SAMPLE TEACHING STATEMENTS

*Eric Dufresne is a new professor at Yale in the department of Mechanical Engineering. He was a postdoc at Harvard when he wrote this statement last year, which refers to his time as an undergraduate at Yale. This statement was actually a few paragraphs in his cover letter, not a separate statement of teaching philosophy.*

+++++

### Description of Teaching Interests

Eric R. Dufresne

Since I first began to tutor classmates in high school, teaching has been an important part of my life. I would be delighted to have the opportunity to teach and mentor students at Yale.

I have extensive teaching experience in a range of environments. While I was at Yale, I spent a summer teaching math and science at Summerbridge, an innovative program for motivated middle-school students. Through Program SMArT, I worked one-on-one with two New Haven middle school students on semester-long science projects. I also tutored a number of students in introductory physics. During graduate school, I was a teaching assistant for introductory physics and electronics over three semesters. In lieu of taking the advanced laboratory course, I developed new spectroscopy and laser cooling experiments, some of which have been integrated into the curriculum. Finally, I regularly tutored two high school students in math and physics over three years. At Harvard, I have advised undergraduates in summer research projects and currently advise a graduate student in his thesis research.

I look forward to teaching and mentoring at Yale. In addition to teaching traditional courses in Mechanical Engineering, Applied Physics, and Physics, I would enjoy developing new courses. I am particularly interested in offering a new graduate and upper-level undergraduate course on the physics of complex fluids. This course would explore the unique and diverse properties of this broad class of materials while introducing and revisiting important concepts in statistical mechanics, fluids, rheology and interfacial forces.

I am also interested in bringing new approaches to the teaching of existing courses. My goal in teaching will be to empower students to become leaders within their chosen field. To that end, I will try to emphasize critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication skills in addition to the problem-solving skills that will make them experts in a subject. Finally, because student/mentor relationships are extremely important to student development, I would like to create opportunities for undergraduates to participate in research as early as the summer after their freshman year. During my sophomore year at Yale, Bill Bennett offered me a opportunity to do a semester-long independent research project. This experience gave me my first flavor of real research and strengthened my resolve to become a scientist.

---

*Aaron Sachs graduated from Yale's American Studies Department in May, 2004 and is now a professor of intellectual history at Cornell University. Careful readers will notice that he omits mentioning specific course-teaching experience, partly because he taught less than two classes at Yale. Instead of apologizing for that weakness, he focuses admirably on his strengths.*

+++++

Aaron Sachs  
November, 2003

### **Teaching Statement**

My goal, in every class I teach, is to make my students stop and think. I urge them to embrace critical and independent thought, a kind of intellectual responsibility, by engaging deeply with texts and then respecting and analyzing their personal reactions to them. If you know who you are in relation to someone else's ideas, then you're invested in your society: you care about how people do things.

In undergraduate history classes, I try to use as many primary documents as possible: memoirs, letters, speeches, journals, court cases, even poems and novels. I want students to hear the voices of people who lived in the period we're studying. Of course, in combination with a few carefully chosen secondary works, those primary documents also give students a chance to *question* the authors' voices, to discover how texts both reveal and cover up truths, how they reflect or challenge the assumptions of the author's culture. Who gets excluded in a given text? What is at stake for the author?

With almost every text I teach, I urge students to write a short "response paper" before coming to class in which they pick out a particular theme or quotation for close analysis. What do you connect with in this reading? What do you find significant and why? I insist that they make an effort to consider when the text was written and try to place it within some sort of historical context. But I also make sure they feel free to speculate about its relevance to today's world.

I believe in democratizing the classroom, so, in a seminar setting, I make it clear to students from the beginning that the onus is on them to lead discussions. I want them to go through the active process of making discoveries by comparing perspectives and disagreeing with each other rather than simply listening passively to the teacher's interpretation of a given text. (I also tend to talk openly with my students about creating an atmosphere in which everyone contributes but no one dominates, about maintaining a spirit of both debate and civility.) I generally suggest that they come to class with outlines of key themes, a list of questions, and even references to specific pages. At the same time, though, in my own preparation for class, I always make extensive notes as to the essential points I'd like to see covered in our discussion, and I'll consistently draw the discussion back to those points when we get sidetracked.

One of the key challenges in a history course, I think, is making it cohere as a whole, fitting the texts together, tracking themes across time and space. History is ultimately a series of disparate stories we tell about the past, and it would be foolish to turn those stories into one overarching, teleological narrative. But I do think it's worthwhile to encourage students to ask big, interpretive questions throughout a given semester, to develop ways of weaving the strands of the course into some sort of web. If the past is a foreign country, I'd at least like to pack my students' bags with a map, compass, water bottle, and dictionary of useful phrases.