

Postdoc Workshop: Research and Teaching Statements

DTM Staff Scientists Diana Roman, Lara Wagner, and Peter van Keken led the workshop on November 8, at 2:30 p.m. EDT.

When you apply for an academic position, typically an institution will get some 100 applications for a single opening. Busy faculty members weed out the 15 top candidates and then choose the top 5 they're going to bring in for interview. Of those top 15 candidates, any one of them would be good choices. To that end, your CV and research and teaching statements are super important.

So, how do you get yourself into the top 15 and 5?

Diana Roman: Cover Letters and CVs

You should already be applying for jobs even if you just started your fellowship at DTM. You get one to two application cycles in the academic year.

Cover letters are difficult—people get stuck. More or less, you are going to be sending the same statement and CV in various applications, but your cover letter is a chance to personalize the application for the job. The letter should have substance, not just a “please find attached my stuff” kind of message. In the letter, also introduce yourself but don't reiterate too much. Who you are, what you do, and your research focus. More important: convey the fact that you want this particular job. You could talk about people in a specific department you see yourself working with, or programs you could contribute to. That's the meaning of the cover letter.

The CV, the very first thing it is going to do, is make the first impression. So page one of your CV is very important, the absolute first impression. Key things include there: put the info they are going to care most about. The order of these things is important. If it's a teaching job, emphasize teaching. Also very important is background of education and how productive you have been. So, publications, awards, other things that include conference presentations, grants, employment history, teaching experience. Page one also should show your degree and publications. Also if you gave talks, if you did a service, if you advised undergrads—these things color everything else. Do not include a photo of yourself, and no personal information.

The other point about the CV is legibility. Don't get cute with fonts. Know the difference between a resume and a CV. Make it easy to follow, legible, consistent in style. Make it easy to navigate sections. Simple and professional is the key.

Lara Wagner: Research Statements

For an academic job, the information you want to convey is (1) who they are hiring, (2) how that person would interact with colleagues, and (3) what s/he brings to the department. What is your expertise? What are you uniquely good at? Also, how are you going to fit in terms of the research you do, what's your vision, and how does it interact with the department you are going into?

Two parts in your research statement are critically important: What have you done and what will you do? They want to see that you yourself understand why your research is important. So, who cares about your science? Why are you excited about it? What's the importance of it? Emphasize in the statement why you are the right candidate, but be careful to avoid repeating what you have in your cover letter. Do this with simplicity and crisply. And do that logically and within the context of that department. The best statements are the ones that provide a reasonably clear vision of what will be accomplished in the next five years. That is because by then, it's the typical time you are going to be evaluated (for tenure).

Most universities want to hire someone who will get tenure. So, establish yourself as your own scientist. You need to show in your research statement that you are starting to be your own person, that your research is not the same as that of your advisor. The more you can convey that your research is exciting to the broader community, the better you can imply you are the right candidate.

Peter van Keken: Teaching Statement

Suggested reading the *Science* article titled, [“Writing the Teaching Statement.”](#)

Know yourself and your audience. For example, if you’ve never been a TA, don’t say you’re going to be the greatest teacher in the world. What they want is commitment to teaching. State that you are committed to becoming a faculty member, and that you can see yourself as a contributing member of the department.

Most research schools take teaching seriously. You’re going to be teaching non-science majors. So, a limited amount of teaching will be in your specialty. Keep that in mind as you are writing your teaching statement. Even if you went through undergrad there, make sure you look at the school’s teaching program. What’s being taught there and how might you fit into that program. Nobody is interested in someone who has no experience. Demonstrate that you have that knowledge and highlight, for example, courses you would feel comfortable teaching—or even starting a new course. Avoid stating you are going to dramatically improve the Intro to Geology programs, for example. Make sure the commitment to teaching shows you see teaching almost as part of research, not a secondary thing.

Teaching statements can be a place of pitfalls. You can step on peoples toes in many ways. Be careful with saying things like, “I will do X and Y,” because that may not be what they want. What you want is to tell them what you *could* do. Everyone wants you to help out with the teaching in the department. You want to be somebody they are going to be psyched to put on courses. You could state, “I would be more than happy to develop undergrad coursework covering...”

If you are on the edge of that top 15 line, the teaching statement can make a significant difference. Do not make the mistake to take this lightly.

* Roman, Wagner, and Van Keken offered their assistance in reviewing individual teaching and research statements and to answering questions on a case-by-case basis.

(Notes by Roberto Molar)