The job ads started appearing in early November, and my applications for my first tenure-track job were almost ready to go. I had touched up my CV, updated my research statement, and printed both on expensive stationery in an appealing and dignified font. I had used up a ream of paper making copies of my three most important (or least boring) journal articles. I had purchased a stack of envelopes that were just waiting to be stuffed with application materials and shipped to departments in the biological sciences all over the country.

I just had to finish writing my teaching statement.

Or, to be more accurate, I had to start writing it.

I wasn’t being lazy. I had tried to write it any number of times, but every attempt ended with a string of pointed comments from my mental red pen:

- "In the last few years, I have come to realize that I truly love teaching." (So you hated it for the first few years? Why did it take you so long to change your mind? What are you, slow?)

- "When I was in high school, my favorite biology teacher . . ." (A favorite teacher story? Oh, now that's original.)
I tried personal anecdotes, insightful quotations, parody, aphorisms, wit. Nothing worked. But if I didn't know how to overcome writers' block, I would never have made it through graduate school. So I went back to basics and tried to answer a few simple questions.

What are my goals? That's easy: I want a job. On a more immediate level, I want to convince a hiring committee that I am a good teacher worthy of a campus visit.

What are the guidelines for writing a teaching statement? That's much harder. On the surface, at least, there aren't any. Almost every job ad asked for some sort of teaching statement, but none of the ads gave a hint about what the departments were looking for. Ads are expensive and are therefore kept as short as possible, so I checked on the colleges' Web sites. Still nothing.

On to the next question: Who is my audience, and what does it want? A quick Google search turned up plenty of answers. One professor at a small college believes that teaching statements are one of the most important parts of an application. Another goes even further: Committee members receive so many applications that they'll seize upon any infelicity in the teaching statement as an excuse to throw another application on the discard pile.

That's about what I expected, but wait: Still another professor at a small college reveals that she often doesn't bother to read teaching statements.

I suppose I can live with that. As an academic, I'm used to people paying no attention to what I write. But what about those people who do decide to read my statement? What on earth do they want?
I looked back at all three columns, but the answers were still unclear. One source says we should include specifics in the statement and avoid abstractions. Another observes that we, as beginning teachers, might not have many specific ideas on teaching yet, but we should nonetheless avoid insipid rhetoric. A third writes that we should try to incorporate the college's mission statements -- which sounds sensible enough, except that in my experience they consist of nothing but abstractions and insipid rhetoric.

So let's get this straight:

- Send syllabi from three, one, zero, or all of the classes you have taught. Toot your own horn, but not too softly (you'll sound insecure) or too loudly (you'll sound arrogant).

- Send a full set of student evaluations but not those summary statistics of your ratings. (Who knows what those numbers mean, anyway?)

- Send only the summary statistics and not the full set of evaluations. (Who wants a stack of papers filled with subjective comments when you could have numbers instead?)

- Send everything, says one professor at a research university, whether requested or not (except for correspondence with students; those will land you on his reject pile).

- Send only what committees ask for, counters a colleague of mine. Otherwise, you'll look as though you were mass-mailing your applications instead of tailoring them to specific departments, which means that you'll look unfocused and sloppy, which means that you're sure to end up with a rejection letter.

My audience, then, is a bunch of idiosyncratic curmudgeons. (I suppose I should've known -- they're professors, after all.)
At this point, I started feeling rather curmudgeonly myself. I couldn't possibly guess the committee's vision of the ideal candidate, and I didn't want to try. No, I was a curmudgeon writing to curmudgeons, and my only hope was to convince them that I was the sort of curmudgeon they could tolerate without too much fuss.

I sat down in front of my computer, and I gave it to them straight. I told the committee members that if they hired me, I would teach their students as much as I could about natural science. I would also teach them how much we still don't know, and I would try to equip them with the tools they need to make discoveries of their own. I'm not much for arcane theoretical discourse; I like to point out the relevance of class material to everyday life. I like to ask my students to give oral presentations and write papers in a variety of styles. I use videos -- but sparingly. I'm not afraid to look silly if it helps me get my point across.

In short, I was myself (well, a somewhat idealized version thereof). I decided that if search committees didn't like me, I probably wouldn't like them either, and we would be better off without each other.

But how are committees supposed to figure out who we really are? Most of what we submit to them -- the vita, the research statement, the cover letter -- is fairly formulaic and therefore gives relatively little sense of the person writing it. If a committee gave specific guidelines for the teaching statement, it would probably end up with something equally formulaic (similar to what happens when academics are asked about diversity).

On the other hand, if a committee leaves the matter wide open, it will get a broad range of responses, and there will be a chance -- however slim -- that it can weed out some of the phonies, the sycophants, and the people who simply don't fit.

Maybe that's the real purpose of the teaching statement: It's a subtle combination of screening form and Rorschach test.
Then again, maybe I'm overanalyzing. It's all guesswork. What else can I do? Before long, though, I'll find out if I have guessed right.

Jeremy S. Clay is the pseudonym of a postdoc in the biological sciences at a research university in the West. He is chronicling his search for a tenure-track job this academic year.