

Applying for an Academic Position: Dissertation Abstracts, Research Statements, and Writing Samples

Whether you're applying for a postdoctoral research position or a tenure-track faculty job, you'll probably be asked to submit either a dissertation abstract or a statement summarizing your research interests (the former is more common in the Humanities, the latter in the Sciences). As we've already said in our discussion of CVs and cover letters, conventions of a research statement or dissertation abstract will vary from discipline to discipline, so consult with your dissertation director and other faculty in your department to find out what the conventions are in your field. Below we've summarized some of the main features and important differences in these supporting documents. **Be sure to proofread all written materials you send as part of your application!**

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT & STATEMENT OF RESEARCH INTERESTS

A dissertation abstract should...

- Stimulate enough interest and enthusiasm about your work to convince a hiring committee that you are their leading candidate.
- Make a persuasive and memorable argument, and provide a clear and highly polished discussion of how your work contributes to the field.
- Outline the main arguments of your dissertation and situate them in relation to your discipline as a whole.
- Stress the arguments and results of your work, not hypotheses and conjecture.
- Be accessible to generalists in your field, while still highlighting your contribution to a particular field of study within your discipline.

A research statement should...

- Emphasize the trajectory of your recent and future research.
- Draw a connection between the work you've already done, either as part of your dissertation or in lab/fieldwork, and your plans for future research.
- Explain why your current project is important and demonstrates that your future research will follow logically from what you have done, and that it will be different, important, and innovative.
- Present your research history and future research plans in terms accessible to generalists in your discipline.

WRITING SAMPLES

As part of your application you will, in all likelihood, be asked to submit a writing sample. The writing sample provides a search committee with an in-depth picture of how you think and argue, as well as your ability to express your ideas in lucid prose. Do not underestimate its importance. When choosing a writing sample, make sure it is relevant to the position for which you are applying. If the department is looking for a medievalist, don't send a piece on contemporary fiction simply because you've written or published one. Departments want to see how you negotiate the texts and critical and theoretical polemics of the particular field for which

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they are hiring. This is especially important for ABDs; sending an essay unrelated to your field of specialization may raise suspicions that you have not made significant progress toward completion of the dissertation. Use either a published article or a chapter of your dissertation.

If you use a dissertation chapter, consider the following:

- Search committees often like to see a chapter from the body of your dissertation, which represents the nuts and bolts of your research, and not the introduction or conclusion.
- You may wish to include a short explanation of where the chapter fits in the overall structure and argument of your dissertation.
- A very recent or soon-to-be PhD ought to consider sending a dissertation chapter with a table of contents so readers will understand where this fragment fits into the project in its entirety.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- The Science Education Resource Center at Carleton College outlines the purposes of a research statement and provide advice on how to tailor the research statement to a particular job: http://serc.carleton.edu/NAGTWorkshops/careerprep/jobsearch/research_statement.html
- Career Services office at the University of Pennsylvania provide a useful powerpoint on “How to Write an Effective Research Statement: http://serc.carleton.edu/files/NAGTWorkshops/careerprep/jobsearch/research_statement.ppt
- Another useful PowerPoint, from Armand Tanguay, Jr. at the University of Southern California, can be found at: http://cet.usc.edu/resources/academic_resources/docs/res_statement_apr05.pdf
- Harvard University also provides clear advice for writing a dissertation abstract here: http://www.gsas.harvard.edu/current_students/academic_positions.php#diss_abstract
- Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong, provide further advice on selecting the best writing sample: <http://chronicle.com/article/Writing-SamplesTeaching/125726/>