

[I wrote this when I was applying for jobs at a private high schools. But some colleges ask for something like this.]

## PERSONAL STATEMENT

CATHY DAY

My job is to teach students how to think, not what to think, to develop rational individuals who can express themselves clearly and can read and listen with understanding. To accomplish this, I create a collaborative classroom environment. Students must require sophisticated thinking and communication skills to prepare them for their college careers and for the rapidly-changing society they will enter. In high school and college, I learned the most from my teachers who were unafraid of the gray area between the podium and the desks. They were caring professionals who motivated students by demanding excellence and creating a safe atmosphere where ideas could be shared freely. During my four years as a teaching assistant at the University of Alabama, I gained the confidence necessary to teach in this way, and as an instructor for the last two years, I've honed my ability to create an energized classroom experience. I believe that teachers must strive not to "out-talk" their students, but to provide an environment that is both relaxed enough to inspire students to make their voices heard, and challenging enough to create a high level of intellectual exchange. Over the years, I've learned how to create a classroom that is both empowering and stimulating and developed a caring, vibrant classroom presence to which my students respond well. Each semester, I'm personally and professionally gratified when new students approach me saying, "I've never liked English, but I took your class because my friend said it was the best class she ever had."

For the last two years, I've been fortunate to teach honors freshman composition, a course of my own design for advance students. I use theme-based units to teach them to write creatively, logically, critically, and responsively. Students write a short story and then compose an essay on what they learned from writing the story. They learn inductive and deductive reasoning, how to create strong, valid arguments, and how to avoid the pitfalls of logical fallacies. They learn how to read closely poems, stories, and plays and to write literary critical analysis. All of these assignments begin with reader-response essays; they are encouraged to make a personal connection with their subject, to write with something at stake, and to carry their inspiration and excitement to the page. Because they are already above-average writers, I "teach" them something else—how to love learning, language, scholarship, and the exchange of ideas.

The students who enroll in my American literature class, a "required" course, provide a different kind of challenge to me as a teacher. Many of these students believe that I'm going to tell them what the "deep hidden meanings" are anyway, so why should they bother to think on their own? I show my students how to read closely so that literature is no longer a complex puzzle, but a source of history, ideas, and inspiration. In addition to more traditional writing assignments, I ask students to write as Kate Chopin, explaining why they wrote *The Awakening*, or as Harlem Renaissance writers, defining their racial identities. Many of my students tell me that my course showed them that by reading, they can understand both the past and the present.

As a writer, I also enjoy teaching creative writing and sharing my love of language and storytelling with the students. But to a degree, I incorporate a little creative writing into all my classes, as I've described above. Writing creatively encourages young people to become self-reflective, imaginative, articulate, analytical—ideal qualities for the future college students, job seeker, and citizen to possess.

Instilling these qualities in young people demands generosity of spirit I really didn't even know I had. I came to Alabama six years ago to become a writer, but lucky for me, I was awarded a teaching assistantship. I've learned that it is possible to have more than one calling in life. I'm at my best as a writer when I'm teaching and best as a teacher when I'm writing. I'd like the opportunity to continue my work in a community of educators who strive to make a difference in the lives of young people.