

Approaching the Diversity Statement

This handout from the Hixon Writing Center is designed to help you write a diversity statement that accompanies applications to faculty positions, graduate school, and fellowships. Note that some institutions will still ask you to discuss diversity in other parts of the application, such as a cover letter, teaching statement, or personal statement. This handout can help you critically evaluate how you address the prompt regardless of the form your response takes.

Writing about diversity is an important part of the academic application process. Increasingly, U.S. institutions are requesting that applicants submit a 1- to 2-page diversity statement, with the broad aim of recruiting a diverse faculty and student body in addition to demonstrating their own commitment to diversity and inclusion. However, institutions will differ in their objectives as well as how they use and evaluate these statements during the search process.

Although expectations will vary with each university or program, there are several features of an effective diversity statement that are shared across most contexts. In general, your statement should demonstrate:

- how your background and experiences have shaped your understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)
- your understanding of the barriers that historically excluded groups have faced in higher education, your specific field, and the broader community
- your commitment to dismantling these barriers and increasing diversity in higher education, your specific field, and the communities of which you are part
- your contributions and plans to support and foster diversity in your field, university, and community.

To access this handout online, visit writing.caltech.edu/resources.

In the early stages of developing your diversity statement, you may be negotiating the following questions:

1. How should I define diversity? What other keywords are relevant to diversity statements?

- **Diversity statements often expect writers to address diversity, inclusion, and equity.** Readers of diversity statements will expect you to address the keywords that matter to you and explain how you define those concepts. For example, diversity is related to inviting people with varied identities and backgrounds into a community. Inclusion involves ensuring everyone in a community is actively made to feel safe and welcome there. Equity requires the recognition and redress of biases, barriers, and structural oppressions that have disempowered and excluded some groups.

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- In addition to reading the statement prompt, you can learn more by **researching an institution's statements on diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and guidelines, as well as programs/initiatives organized around promoting diversity at the university, department, or organization to which you are applying.** You can usually find this information on the webpage of the diversity center/office, human resources, careers, campus announcements, or leadership offices. **Type in key word searches in the university's webpage to find strategic documents and/or key initiatives within DEI.** Researching will allow you to familiarize yourself with conversations relevant to the school or organization and better customize your statement.
- **Use the school or program's diversity statement evaluation rubric** to get a clearer picture of what DEI means to your reader and how they will assess your contributions. In cases where a rubric is not available to you, consider this excellent sample rubric from UC Berkeley's Office for Faculty Equity & Welfare: [Rubric for Assessing Candidate Contributions to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#).
- To learn more about what it means to build diverse and inclusive communities, you can **attend [CCID's Decoding Diversity](#)**, an introductory workshop offered to the Caltech community.

2. What experiences can I write about in my diversity statement?

Effective diversity statements highlight experiences that demonstrate an applicant's commitment to diversity. Consider selecting 2-3 (or more) elements from the list below. You can use the Hixon Writing Center's [Diversity Meaning Making Worksheet](#) to help you evaluate, prioritize, and balance relevant experiences.

- **Personal and Educational Background:** Draw on your personal history or educational upbringing to contextualize your perspective on diversity. Here you can expand on your background and describe unique experiences, challenges, and successes. Although some diversity statements may ask you to write about your background, how much personal history you disclose is entirely up to you. If you think including details about your own identity is relevant to your experiences and values, share what you are comfortable disclosing. You are not required to claim specific identities (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality) in a diversity statement. (Note: A statement that focuses only on your identity is rarely effective, especially for faculty applications. Incorporate experiences and activities that demonstrate how you have actively promoted diversity and inclusion in your field and on campus.)
- **Teaching:** Reflect on your experiences as a faculty member, instructor, lecturer, and/or teaching assistant. Describe (1) ways you have taught, guided, mentored, and advised students; (2) your effectiveness in creating a classroom environment that is open and welcoming to all students; or (3) development of strategies that advance student learning and educational achievement. To learn more about how you can implement inclusive teaching practices in the classroom, visit [Caltech's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Outreach \(CTLO\)](#).

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- **Research and Intellectual Work:** Think deeply about the possible applications and reach of your work. Discuss whether your research addresses or benefits (1) underserved or historically excluded populations; (2) issues of diversity and inclusion disparities in your research studies; or (3) questions of interest or questions related to historically excluded groups. Think also about the people with whom you do research; describe efforts to diversify your research group or collaborations.
- **Academic Service:** Reflect on your service to the Caltech community. Consider discussing (1) your work in programs that increase participation in your discipline/field; (2) your service on panels, committees, student organizations, or contributions aimed at recruiting, retaining, and mentoring students from historically excluded groups; or (3) your participation, management, or leadership in groups that allow you to advocate for others and foster diversity within Caltech.
- **Outreach:** Examine the ways you've engaged with communities outside of Caltech. Consider discussing (1) your work in programs or events that increase participation in your discipline/field; (2) ways you have worked to open access to higher education to others or helped others reach their educational goals (e.g. through mentoring, tutoring, etc.); (3) your participation, management, or leadership in groups that allow you to advocate for others and promote diversity and inclusion in communities beyond Caltech; or (4) efforts to share research findings with the broader public. To learn more about how you can get involved with Caltech's education outreach programs, visit [CTLO's Outreach page](#).
- **Professional Activity:** Describe whether you have helped to address problems in your professional field, especially those that specifically address the professional advancement of individuals in minoritized groups. For example, have you developed new approaches for connecting students to internship opportunities in industry?
- **Personal Growth:** Think about how you are continuing to educate yourself on issues surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion. For example, if you have completed training or attended workshops given by CCID, you can write about how these events have helped shape your understanding of diversity.

3. How do I write a diversity statement if I do not have substantial experiences to draw from?

- **Be authentic.** Everyone can write a diversity statement. You don't have to belong to a particular group to be able to demonstrate a commitment to diversity, which is what the statement is primarily concerned with. If you've had to overcome obstacles in achieving your educational goals and wish to highlight it, you can. Conversely, if you have not encountered those obstacles, you can acknowledge it. If you are just beginning to contribute to diversity or join the conversation, consider writing about what you've learned. Regardless of your background, you can explain how your unique experiences have motivated you to cultivate more diverse and inclusive communities of which you are a part.

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- **Look within your own scientific field.** You do not need to draw upon your personal background to justify your motivations or interest in diversity. Think of the key demographic trends or current issues within your own field and write about your experiences within these contexts. To gain more insight on what some of these trends and issues are, look to national STEM reports (e.g., [National Science Foundation Science and Engineering Indicators Report: Higher Education in Science and Engineering](#)) or professional organizations in your field.
- **Draw from other positive experiences** that will allow you to apply skills toward increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Highlighting your involvement in school groups or events can demonstrate thoughtfulness in how you build relationships with others and how you treat and support members of your community. For example, consider how a leadership or management role on campus has allowed you to work with different students to succeed in completing a task or make meaningful change.
- Your statement should balance work you've done so far and work you want to do in the future. If you do not have substantial past activities, you can **focus more on future plans** in your statement. Here, you will want to be realistic and concrete about your plans for future diversity work. However, keep in mind that a demonstrated and sustained record of past contributions is given greater weight than only communicating awareness of barriers or stating future plans.

4. What qualities should my writing have?

- **Show rather than tell.** Don't just state that you think diversity is important. Illustrate this value using specific experiences or actions. For example, you can write about specific experiences that have exposed you to inequities and inequalities in your field, confirmed the need for increased diversity, or allowed you to contribute meaningfully to enhancing diversity in your community.
- **Consider the potential diversity of your readers and how they will respond to your statement.** The committees reviewing your application will differ from each other, as will the individual readers within those committees. Tailor your content and language to match your audience as well as the unique goals of the institution or the needs of their student population.
- Your statement should **communicate your cultural competence.** Cultural competence is broadly defined as the ability to understand, respect, and effectively interact with people across cultures. The experiences you describe and the language and tone you adopt in your statement should reflect these values.
- **Use inclusive, person-first language** if your statement requires identifying language. There are many published guidelines on inclusive language available on the internet. For example: [APA Style Bias-Free Language Guide](#) and [WGBH's Guidelines on Inclusive Language](#).
- **Be clear and concise.** Faculty reading your statement are busy people. If your statement is difficult to understand at the sentence or paragraph level or it's too

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long, then you risk losing your reader. Take time to edit for clarity and check the prompt for any length requirements. Many graduate school applications will ask for a brief statement on diversity while faculty applications may ask for longer statements (1-2 pages). If no guidelines are given, we recommend that you aim for a single-spaced 1-page document.

5. What are common writing mistakes I should avoid?

- **Don't write a treatise on diversity.** Although your statement should articulate your awareness of current discussions related to diversity, it should be short and centered on you, your values, and your commitment/contributions to diversity.
- **Don't make your statement about someone else.** Consider your communication goals and evaluate your purpose for writing about someone else in your statement. If you choose to describe someone, do so in a way that respects them as individuals and gives them agency within the story you're telling. Remember that their story is theirs to tell and your statement should focus on your own experiences. Additionally, when writing about your relationships with students, be sure to preserve their anonymity and privacy.
- **Avoid false parallels when writing about challenges you've faced.** Be careful to not equate your experiences and challenges to those of groups with whom you do not identify. Write with specificity about the experiences you know best: your own.
- **Avoid comparing experiences across different identities and systems of oppression.** For example, do not compare issues of race with issues of gender. Although they both relate to diversity and can intersect, equating them or making them parallel diminishes their unique challenges. Similarly, do not lump the experiences of different races and ethnicities together.
- **Don't deny the existence of systemic oppression and discrimination** because you have not personally experienced it or feel that you have triumphed over it. Similarly, do not suggest that equal access has already been achieved. Diversity statements exist because of the widespread recognition of the pernicious effects of systemic oppression and discrimination.
- When writing about your goals or positive outcomes in teaching, research, or service, **do not position yourself as the hero or take credit for the achievements** of students with whom you've worked. You can explain how you have supported others or removed barriers without taking credit for students' and colleagues' hard work and abilities.

6. Who can give me helpful feedback on my statement?

- **Talk with mentors in your field.** They're likely to have read diversity statements while serving on admissions or search committees, and they may have developed their own ideas for what makes an effective diversity statement. They may also have suggestions for how you can customize your statement to your specific field.

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- **Show your working drafts to varied readers with different backgrounds and identities**, including those who know you well and those who do not, as well as those within and outside your research specialization. As you decide how to revise in response to feedback, be aware that no one knows exactly what each admissions or search committee will prioritize.
- **Make an appointment with one of our Writing Specialists at the Hixon Writing Center** to discuss your draft. Appointments are made in the “Writing Center Scheduler” in access.caltech.edu. CCID can also provide useful feedback on your statement.

7. Where can I learn more about diversity?

Topics within diversity are wide-ranging, and thus there will be many areas in which you can continue to study and learn. This list of resources we’ve compiled below is by no means exhaustive, nor does it necessarily represent the viewpoints of the Hixon Writing Center. We hope it can serve as a starting point for someone seeking to further educate themselves on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Several of the resources listed below are available through the Caltech Library and can be accessed here: [Resources for Writing Diversity Statements LibGuide](#).

ANTHOLOGIES ABOUT DIVERSITY:

- [Case Studies on Diversity and Social Justice Education](#) | Paul C. Gorski and Seema G. Pothini
- [Racism in America: A Reader](#) | Harvard University Press (downloadable for free on pdf)
- [Readings for Diversity and Social Justice](#) | Maurianne Adams, Warren J. Blumenfeld, D. Chase J. Catalano, Keri Dejong, Heather W. Hackman, Larissa E. Hopkins, Barbara Love, Madeline L. Peters, Davey Shlasko, and Ximena Zuniga
- [Voices for Diversity and Social Justice: A Literary Education Anthology](#) | Julie Landsman, Rosanna M. Salcedo, and Paul C. Gorski

BOOKS ON BUILDING CULTURAL COMPETENCE:

- [Cultural Competence Now: 56 Exercises to Help Educators Understand and Challenge Bias, Racism, and Privilege](#) | Vernita Mayfield
- [Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders](#) | Randall B. Lindsey, Kikanza Nuri-Robins, Raymond D. Terrell, and Delores B. Lindsey

BOOKS ON INCLUSIVE TEACHING:

- [Equity by Design: Delivering on the Power and Promise of UDL](#) | Mirko Chardin and Katie R. Novak
- [Promoting Inclusive Classroom Dynamics in Higher Education](#) | Kathryn C. Oleson
- [Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice](#) | Maurianne Adams and Lee Anne Bell

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BOOKS ON BUILDING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- [Diversity and Inclusion on Campus: Supporting Students of Color in Higher Education](#) | Rachelle Winkle-Wagner and Angela M. Locks
- [Diversity's Promise for Higher Education: Making It Work](#) | Daryl G. Smith
- [From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education](#) | Tia Brown McNair, Estela Mara Bensimon, Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux
- [Rethinking Diversity Frameworks in Higher Education](#) | Edna B. Chun and Joe R. Feagin
- [Strategic Diversity Leadership: Activating Change and Transformation in Higher Education](#) | Damon A. Williams

BOOKS ON DIVERSIFYING STEM:

- [Broadening Participation in STEM: Effective Methods, Practices, and Programs \(Diversity in Higher Education\)](#) | Zayika Wilson-Kennedy, Goldie S. Byrd, Eugene Kennedy
- [Diversifying STEM: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Race and Gender](#) | Ebony O. McGee and William H. Robinson
- [Successful STEM Mentoring Initiatives for Underrepresented Students: A Research-Based Guide for Faculty and Administrators](#) | Becky Wai-Ling Packard and Norman L. Fortenberry

BOOKS ON BUILDING DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES:

- [Building an Inclusive Organization: Leveraging the Power of a Diverse Workforce](#) | Stephen Frost and Raafi-Karim Alidina
- [How to Be an Inclusive Leader: Your Role in Creating Cultures of Belonging Where Everyone Can Thrive](#) | Jennifer Brown
- [Inclusify: The Power of Uniqueness and Belonging to Build Innovative Teams](#) | Stefanie K. Johnson
- [Inclusion: Diversity, The New Workplace & The Will to Change](#) | Jennifer Brown

ARTICLES ON WRITING YOUR DIVERSITY STATEMENT:

- [5 Don'ts in Writing Your DEI Statement](#) | Manya Whitaker, The Chronicle of Higher Education
- [Developing and Writing a Diversity Statement](#) | Sara Beck, Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University
- [Diversity Statements](#) | The Writing Center at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- ['Underrepresented Minority' Considered Harmful, Racist Language](#) | Tiffani L. Williams, Communications of The Association for Computing Machinery



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