

**Dr. Karen’s Rules of the Research Statement**

Posted on [August 30, 2012](http://theprofessorisin.com/2012/08/30/dr-karens-rules-of-the-research-statement/) by [Karen](http://theprofessorisin.com/author/drkaren/)

**An expanded and updated version of this post can now be found in Chapter  27 of my new book,**[**The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job.**](http://theprofessorisin.com/?p=6032)**I am keeping a shortened version here, but for the complete discussion including the template for a research statement, please do purchase the book, which compiles all my major job market posts along with 50% entirely new material.**

Today, at long last, and in response to popular demand, a post on the Research Statement.

I have, perhaps, procrastinated on blogging about the Research Statement because at some level I felt that the rules might be more variable on this document, particularly with regard to length.

But in truth, they really aren’t.

The RS needs to be one page long. [Addendum of 9/9/12:  After a great deal of discussion on comment stream and FB and email, I have decided to revise this advice and recommend a length of no more than two pages.  Two pages allows for an elaboration of the research well beyond the summary in the cover letter that gives the search committee substantial information to work with.  I cannot in good faith recommend going over two pages, for the reasons I sketch below, but I strongly urge all job-seekers to investigate the norms of their individual fields carefully, and follow the advice they receive on this matter from experts in their own fields.  Just never simply ASSUME that longer is better in an RS or in any job document.]

There are undoubtedly a number of excellent reasons that people could give for writing a longer RS, based on thoroughness or detail or concerns for accuracy. And I would acknowledge those principles as valid ones.

But they would all come second to the single most important principle of all job market writing, in my view, which is the principle of search committee exhaustion.

Search committee members are exhausted, and they are overwhelmed and distracted. There simply is no bandwidth in their brains or their psyches to handle the amount of material they are required to read, when searches routinely garner between 300 and 1000 applications.

Anything that feels “long” is going to be resented just by virtue of its length. And resentment is categorically what you don’t want a search committee member feeling about your job application materials.

So, in short, the Research Statement,[just like the Teaching Statement](http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/09/16/thedreadedteachingstatement/), needs to be one to two pages in length, single spaced.  And like the TS, it needs to be in 11 or 12 point font, and have decent one-inch margins.

(The RS to which I refer here is the document sometimes requested as part of a basic job application.  This is NOT the research proposal required by specific fellowship or postdoc applications!   Those will specify a length, and should be written to follow the outline I describe in [Dr. Karen’s Foolproof Grant Template](http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/05/dr-karens-foolproof-grant-template/).)

What are the other rules? Here they are:

* Print the RS on regular printer paper. Do not use letterhead for this or the TS, and do not use any special high grade paper.
* Put your name and the words “Research Statement” centered at the top.
* If unsure how to structure, use a 5-paragraph model as follows:

[…]

Here are some additional principles: A RS (like a TS) is not tailored to a school overtly. While you may subtly adjust your project descriptions to speak to a specific type of job, you do not refer to any job or department or application in the statement itself.

* Do not refer to any other job documents in the RS (ie, “As you can see from my CV, I have published extensively….”)
* As in all job documents, remain strictly at the level of the evidentiary. State what you did, what you concluded, what you published, and why it matters for your discipline, period. Do not editorialize or make grandiose claims (“this research is of critical importance to…”).
* Do not waste precious document real estate on what other scholars have NOT done. Never go negative. Stay entirely in the realm of what you did, not what others didn’t.
* Do not position yourself as “extending” or “adding to” or “building off of” or “continuing” or “applying” other work, either your own or others.
* Do not refer to other faculty or scholars in the document. The work is your own. If you co-authored a piece, do not use the name of the co-author. Simply write, “I have a co-authored essay in the Journal of XXX.”
* Do not refer to yourself as studying “under” anybody, and do not refer to your professors’ and advisors’ names. It goes without saying that you most certainly do not refer to anybody as “Dr. or Professor So-and-So.”
* Do not forget to articulate the core argument of your research. I am astounded at how often (probably in about 80% of client documents) I have to remind clients to write such a sentence. This sentence will read like this: “In this dissertation, I argue that…” As a prompt device, you may use the line, “In contrast to other scholars who have interpreted xxx as yyy, in my dissertation I find that xxxx is better understood as zzzz.”
* Give a sense of a publishing trajectory, moving from past to present, from essays published to essays currently in preparation or in submission.
* Make sure you are not coming across as a one-trick pony. The second major project must be clearly distinct and original compared to the first.  Avoid the temptation to describe how you will “continue” or “extend” your previous research topics or approaches.
* Use the active voice as much as possible, but beware a continual reliance on “I-Statements”, as I describe in this post, The Golden Rule of the Research Statement.

I will stop here. Readers, please feel free to add more in the comments.  I will add to this post as further refinements come to mind