7 Years Later

Surviving Graduate School in Philosophy

by Trevor Hedberg

Assistant Professor of Practice
W.A. Franke Honors College / Department of Philosophy
University of Arizona

September 9, 2024

Contents

Overview and Acknowledgements

When I was just starting graduate school in philosophy, I had a lot of questions. What should I do to make myself competitive on the job market? What's the peer review process like? Why do so many people struggle to finish their dissertations? I discovered right away that there was no shortage of answers to these questions. Unfortunately, they were scattered all across the internet (often as blog posts), and the available information was often inconsistent. Rarely did anyone attempt something like a comprehensive and consistent set of advice about graduate school as a whole.[1] This made it difficult to get a clear perception of what graduate school would be like and how I could increase my chances of success.

This guide is my attempt to provide the resource I desired when I was a first-year graduate student – a unified document that covers the most important aspects of graduate school in philosophy and provides advice about how to obtain the PhD and have a decent chance at landing an academic job afterward.

In writing this document, I have drawn in large part on my experiences at the University of Tennessee where I was a graduate student from August 2010 until May 2017, my experiences on the academic job market from 2016–2022, discussions with faculty throughout my professional career, and information I have gleaned from various articles, blog posts, and online discussions. When possible, I have provided hyperlinks to the relevant online resources to avoid cluttering the main text with an overwhelming number of formal citations.

Although I have tried to acknowledge individuals for their feedback or contributions to various parts of this guide in footnotes, I must extend special gratitude to a few people here. John Nolt and David Reidy both provided exemplary mentorship and support to me while I was a graduate student. It is in large part because of their help that I was able to persevere in the profession long enough to write this guide. Additionally, I must extend special thanks to Marcus Arvan for starting the Philosophers' Cocoon and thereby providing a venue for me to share some of these ideas over the years. Cocoon readers and commenters likewise have my gratitude. Feedback on my blog posts has had a huge impact on this document: many of them have reappeared in this guide with expanded or revised content.

---

[1] Such attempts are still rare. One of the few recent examples is Douglas Portmore's "Six Commandments for Getting the Most Out of Graduate School."

Part 1: Preliminaries

Before getting to the heart of the guide, let me address a few general questions you might have about this document. If you don't need these answered, then skip ahead to .

Who Is This Guide Written For?

This guide is primarily aimed at <u>current and prospective philosophy graduate students</u>, especially those who want to <u>obtain a PhD</u> from a university <u>in North America</u> and then <u>be competitive applicants for academic jobs</u>. It may also be useful to philosophy faculty looking for ways to advise graduate students and to those who are considering whether or not to pursue a graduate degree in philosophy in the first place.

If you are pursuing your graduate degree in Europe, then some of the information in this guide will not be relevant to completing your program.[2] If you intend to conclude your studies after obtaining a Master of Arts instead of a PhD, then only a fraction of this material will be applicable to your circumstances. If you are planning to get a PhD but do not intend to seek academic employment, then the advice tied to preparing for the academic job market can be ignored. Nonetheless, I hope that those of you in these other groups will still find something of value in this document.

Given the intended audience for this guide, academic obstacles that emerge after graduate school (e.g., getting tenure) will not be discussed. Similarly, non-academic career options will be acknowledged only briefly.[3]

Since readers are assumed to have already applied to graduate school successfully, the topic of how to apply to graduate programs in philosophy will not be discussed in the main body of the document. Nevertheless, because some graduate students will look to transfer institutions and because some may read this guide before undertaking the application process, I have added two appendices to the document. Appendix A surveys the considerations that affect whether going to graduate school in philosophy is a wise choice, and Appendix B guides readers through the process of applying graduate programs in philosophy.

Will This Guide Help Me Get a Job in Philosophy?

I would love to tell you that following the advice in this guide will guarantee you one of the best jobs in the profession, but that would be a lie. So far as I know, there is <u>nothing</u> that guarantees you will get a job in philosophy.

---

[2] Graduate programs in Europe often differ significantly from those in North America. For instance, PhD programs in Europe often have no coursework requirements.

[3] In large part, this is because the pursuit of a non-academic career will be an idiosyncratic endeavor tied to a person's particular background. Beyond what could be learned from the career services department at most universities, I doubt there is much one-size-fits-all advice that could help a philosophy PhD obtain non-academic employment.

To some extent, the job market functions as a weighted lottery: there are things that you can do to increase your chances of getting a job, but the odds of getting a job are low enough across the board that no amount of work you do will guarantee that you get a job. Given this reality, the best you can achieve by following this guide is that you will be more *competitive* on the job market than you would otherwise be.

Will This Guide Help Me Obtain My PhD?

Yes, it definitely should. It's going to be tough to get your PhD whether you follow this guide or not, but the advice and information in the subsequent pages should give you plenty of strategies to consider that can boost your chances of getting your degree. Of course, as you progress through your program, it's possible that you will grow weary of graduate school and wonder whether getting the PhD is worth it. I discuss that scenario in Part 15. Even in that case, I hope that this guide will help you evaluate your options and decide what's best for you.

How Should I Read This Guide?

While the guide is designed to be read from start to finish, I have broken it down into topical segments so that you can jump to whatever content you want to read. I imagine many readers will be familiar with some of the subject matter already. Nevertheless, I strongly suggest you at least read Part 3 before skipping to other sections of interest.

Part 3 is the foundation on which the rest of the guide is built. It delineates the main long-term goals that you will have to accomplish before the fall semester of your final year in graduate school if you are going to be competitive on the job market and bring your dissertation to a close before you run out of departmental funding. Almost everything else in the guide is designed to aid your achievement of these goals.

If you are a graduate student within your first two years of study, then you have even stronger reasons to read Part 3. Many graduate students do not plan far enough ahead with respect to their professional development or they postpone this kind of long-term thinking until they are midway through their program. You might think that you will have plenty of time to worry about these things later, but you don't. As I explain in Part 3, your window for impactful professional development in graduate school is actually rather small – about 3 years. When that window begins, you need to have a plan and be prepared execute it.

Part 2: The Basics

Congratulations! You've made it to graduate school. Make yourself comfortable. You're probably going to be working toward your PhD for 7 years.[4] It might be longer, depending on whether you transfer institutions and how things go with dissertation writing. But let's put those matters aside for the moment. We need to start with the basics – what you'll generally be doing as a graduate student and what your living conditions will be like.

This part of the guide provides an overview of general program requirements at North American institutions, the standard teaching obligations associated with having an assistantship, and some of the service obligations you may take onboard as a graduate student. I have also included sections on managing your finances and maintaining a positive outlook on your studies. You might be wondering about research, writing, and the dissertation, but these are bigger topics that will be covered later in the guide.

Program Requirements

If you did your homework when you were applying to graduate programs, then you should already have a general idea of what your degree requirements will be. There are always some small differences from program to program, but most programs will have some version of the following requirements:

- **48 Hours of Graduate Coursework**. The number of hours can vary across programs, but you will usually need about 48 hours past your BA to complete the coursework phase of your graduate education. If you enter a doctoral program with a Master's degree, then you may have the number of required hours reduced (depending on how generous your program is about transferring credits from other institutions). Often, those entering with an MA in philosophy will only have to take 24 hours of coursework. Your program will also have distribution requirements, so you'll want to keep in mind which courses fulfill which requirements so that your progress toward comprehensive examinations is not hindered.

- **Comprehensive Examinations**. The most common format for comprehensive examinations is a thorough essay exam (usually conducted over several hours) featuring questions that cover a wide range of philosophical texts. The texts covered will vary from department to department but usually include a large number of well-known and influential works. Preparation for this exam can take months, depending on the number of texts on the reading list. Note, however, that this comprehensive exam format is not

---

[4] If you dig through the [data tables from the NSF's Dotorate Recipients from U.S. Universities](#), you will find that the average time to degree after starting a PhD program is 6.8 years for philosophy and religion. The relevant information is in Table 8-15.

universal. At my own graduate program, we were instead tasked with writing three high-quality papers across different areas of philosophy.[5]

- **Language Requirement**. Not all programs require that you learn a non-English language, but if there is such a requirement, then you will usually need to develop competency in French, Greek, German, or Latin. (In some programs, you will even need to learn more than one of these languages to meet the requirement.) Typically, this requirement can be met by either passing an exam in which you translate a passage (or series of passages) in the given language or by completing a certain number of courses in the language offered at the university. There are also sometimes alternative ways to meet the requirement that involve taking other courses that might contribute to your research.[6] Whatever strategy you pursue, make sure you carve out time during the coursework phase to fulfill this requirement.

- **Master's Thesis or Qualifying Paper**. Some programs will require that you write a Master's thesis or a high-quality paper at some point during your graduate studies.[7] Sometimes, this will be one of the final hurdles to beginning dissertation work; other times, it may occur midway through coursework. In any case, the resulting paper will be much greater in length and polish than a seminar term paper and usually involve significant faculty oversight and feedback throughout the writing process.

- **Dissertation Prospectus**. When you have completed all the requirements listed above (and perhaps others, depending on the specifics of your program), you will consult with your advisor and develop a topic for your dissertation. Once you have settled on a topic and have a plan for developing it into a book-length manuscript,[8] you will form a dissertation committee and present a written prospectus to them for review. If you pass the oral defense of the prospectus, then you will officially achieve All-But-Dissertation (ABD) status and advance to degree candidacy.

- **Dissertation**. Once you have passed the prospectus, you have to actually write the dissertation. Length requirements will vary depending on your advisor's preferences and

---

[5] These papers did not need to be of publishable quality, but they were supposed to be significantly better than standard seminar papers.

[6] For instance, a person who intended to do work in experimental philosophy might be able to get the language requirement waived by taking courses in research methods and experimental design. Whether this is a viable option will depend on program policies and (sometimes) the discretion of the director of graduate studies.

[7] I suspect that the qualifying paper is a more common requirement, but for an example of a well-regarded program that requires an MA thesis, see the program requirements for UNC Chapel Hill.

[8] Some PhD dissertations take the form of a series of interrelated papers rather than a cohesive book-length monograph. MIT's program is one of the few in the U.S. that explicitly lists this as an option, and there is some evidence that other programs allow for the dissertation to take this form. This guide assumes that your dissertation will be a full manuscript, since that is more common and presents a unique challenge relative to the rest of graduate school. If you have the option to write a series of papers instead and go that route, then Part 5 and Part 6 will be the most relevant sections related to your dissertation work, and much of Part 9 will not be applicable to you.

11

the scope of your project.[9] You'll want to get clear with your advisor on the expectations early in the process. Also be warned: while this is the last step on the path to the PhD, it also tends to be the most treacherous. This project usually takes years to complete, and ABD grad students sometimes lose their funding before they finish it. That's one of the main reasons that most PhD program attrition happens at this stage.

This list of requirements might not exhaust what your program requires, so be sure to consult your program's graduate handbook and identify any unusual requirements. Staying on track with everything requires careful long-term planning, and you want to have a clear idea of what you'll be doing from the very beginning of your graduate studies.

Teaching Obligations

While you are working toward your degree, you will most likely have teaching responsibilities. Occasionally, you may have a semester or year off from teaching due to a fellowship or research assistantship (e.g., serving as editorial assistant for a philosophy journal published by your university), but you will normally be required to teach in some capacity for most of your graduate career unless you are not funded by your department.[10] There are generally three forms that this teaching could take:

- **Grader**. Serving as a grader is the most minimal form of teaching. You will attend a class taught by one of the professors in the department and grade the students' exams and papers. Grading is not particularly fun (unless you have a rather rare psychological disposition), but since this is your only responsibility, being a grader typically takes up much less time than other teaching positions.

- **Teaching Assistant**. Like a grader, you are essentially helping a professor teach one of their classes. Generally, you will not play any role in course or assessment design, though you will grade all (or nearly) all of the assignments. You will also supervise 2-3 discussion sections held during the week.

- **Instructor**. When you get into the second half of your graduate career, you will usually have the opportunity to teach your own classes. As an instructor, you will design all aspects of the course from the reading list to the individual assessments. This involves more work than the other types of teaching but is by far the most valuable for your career in the long-term.[11]

---

[9] I have seen dissertations ranging from 120 pages to 500 pages, although I doubt that any advisors would want you to submit a dissertation as long as 500 pages. The typical range seems to be 200-250 pages.

[10] For reasons outlined in Appendix A, I strongly advise against pursuing graduate study in philosophy if you are unable to secure a teaching assistantship package from your department unless you are independently wealthy and *really* want a PhD in philosophy.

[11] Experience as a grader and teaching assistant do not tend to carry much weight on the job market. Search committee members want evidence that you can teach your own courses. After all, you won't be assisting any courses after graduate school: you'll need to be proficient at teaching them on your own.

Beyond these teaching obligations, you may also need to adjunct occasionally at other institutions to generate a little extra income. Whether you need to do this will depend on your personal financial situation. It can be beneficial to gain additional teaching experience before you make your first job market run, especially if your department does not often allow graduate students to serve as solo instructors, but taking on too much additional adjunct work can extend your time to degree and take away time you could devote to your research. Thus, you should usually only undertake adjunct work sparingly.

Service Commitments

Most graduate students will not be required to make service commitments, but you will probably want to engage in some service before you get your PhD This could include serving as a grad student representative to your graduate committee, serving as department representative for graduate student senate, holding a position with your department's graduate student organization (if your department has one), judging rounds in the local high school ethics bowl, and many other activities. Beyond adding some potentially notable items to your CV, service also serves as good preparation for your post-graduate career since service work will often be a component or expectation of your future jobs.

The important thing to remember about service commitments is that they are almost always optional and carry little weight in terms of your job market viability when compared to your teaching and research. Thus, if you are ever pressed for time, service commitments should be the first thing that you relinquish.

Financial Complications[12]

Graduate school is challenging, even under ideal conditions. And in one respect, your conditions are likely to be very far from ideal because you will be making poverty-level wages throughout your graduate career. The size of your stipend will vary depending on your program but is unlikely to be more than $30,000. In most cases, it will be closer to $20,000. Moreover, you will often still have to pay student fees: your tuition will be waived if you are a teaching assistant, but student fees are typically not waived. These can be a rather large sum of money – more than $1000 per semester in some cases.

Now you can start to see the problem. Imagine you're making $20,000 per year on your stipend and lose $1000 per semester in student fees. Now you're down to $18,000 for the year. You'll have monthly bills tied to your rent, utilities, phone, internet, and perhaps other things (e.g., car payments). You'll have frequent expenses tied to groceries and may have occasional expenses tied to doctor's appointments, car repairs, and so on. You'll lose a little of your income to taxes

---

[12] I describe some of the strategies in this section in greater detail in my appearance on the *Personal Finance for PhDs* podcast.

as well. So, here's the big question: how do you live on your stipend without taking out any student loans for your graduate studies?

Because the job prospects for humanities PhDs are rather grim, I do not think taking out student loans to pursue these graduate degrees is a wise move.[13] In most cases, it's a recipe for decades of debt after graduate school. Sadly, that fate cannot always be avoided – the cost of living in some places is just too high relative to the stipend that graduate programs provide. But even in those circumstances, the size of the loan one needs can be reduced significantly with proper planning and money management. In some cases, you might even be able to have a decent standard of living without taking out any loans. This latter sentiment may strike some as too optimistic, but it can be done in some circumstances. It may be easier to understand how it is possible if I provide a concrete example.

For this illustration, I am going to draw on my own time as a graduate student. I did not live a life of luxury, but I was far from being miserable: I resided in a 650-square-foot apartment in a pleasant community and within 5 miles of my university. Now let's crunch the numbers and see how I managed that without taking out any loans.

During my first year in graduate school, I earned about $25,000 through a combination of a 1-year graduate fellowship, a stipend associated with a quarter-time teaching assistantship, and one term of summer teaching. During my remaining 6 years as a graduate student, I earned a stipend of about $15,000. I earned an additional $18,000 in various summers through a combination of teaching, a research assistantship, and a dissertation fellowship. I also got a sizeable payout from my insurance company after my car was totaled in a hailstorm during 2011, which we'll round down to $7000. Now let's tally up these estimated 7-year earnings:

Total Earnings: $25,000 + ($15,000 \times 6) + $18,000 + $7000 = **$140,000**

Now we can consider expenses. My rent and utilities combined were on average about $600 when I was a graduate student.[14] My average grocery costs were a little over $200 per month, but let's bump that up to $250 so we know we're not underestimating expenses.[15] I initially had no car payments, but after my old car was totaled during my first year there, I leased one for a while and then bought a new car in 2013. Overall, my average car payment was about $280, but let's just round that up to $300. I had a cell phone bill that was always between $50 and $70, but let's

---

[13] I go into more detail on this point in Appendix A.

[14] Cost of living in Knoxville, TN is rather low – or at least it was when I was living there. My apartment's average rental rate over those 7 years was barely above $500. The monthly cost of utilities was also relatively low on average but varied considerably because I had several different cable / internet providers and even had a lengthy stretch with no cable or internet at all.

[15] We could stipulate that this estimate includes gas for my car, which was about $20 per month. (I lived close to campus and my car had good gas mileage.)

round that up to $100 per month. Now we have to add another $14,000 for student fees ($2000 per year on average) and $7000 for car insurance ($1000 per year on average).[16]

These figures have probably gotten hard to keep straight, so let's catalog all the expenses before we add up the totals for all 7 years. Remember that there are 12 months in a year, so monthly expenses need to be multiplied by 84 to get the total expenses for 7 years.[17]

Type of Expense	Cost
Rent and Utilities	$600 × 84 = $50,400
Groceries	$250 × 84 = $21,000
Car Payments	$300 × 84 = $25,200
Cell Phone Bill	$100 × 84 = $8,400
Student Fees	$2000 × 7 = $14,000
Car Insurance	$1000 × 7 = $7000
7-Year Total	**$126,000**

In case the total listed looks odd to you, remember that it's just the sum of all the specific expenses. Here's an explicit presentation of the math:

Total Expenses: $50,400 + $21,000 + $25,200 + $8400 + $14,000 + $7000 = **$126,000**

Comparing the figures from the previous page, we see that 7-year earnings are about $14,000 higher than estimated expenses during that time. That's a noteworthy result considering that I intentionally overestimated some expenses and omitted many small sources of income. Those other income sources would have included honorariums, monetary prizes, cash back from credit card purchases, eBay sales, and monetary gifts from relatives (e.g., Christmas gifts). Aggregated over 7 years, these small amounts of money would total several thousand dollars.

Of course, you may also notice that some expenses have been omitted. I didn't tally my taxes, for instance, although my low income meant that I often owed the IRS very little. I also didn't calculate travel expenses. I was usually able to get reimbursed for my conference travel, and my parents frequently helped cover travel expenses back home. Still, there were some trips that required out-of-pocket expenses.

We shouldn't get bogged down in every little detail, though: that misses the point of this exercise. Your circumstances may not resemble mine. I did not provide for any children or pets during graduate school, and having to do either of those would have obviously increased my

---

[16] Health insurance was included as part of my GTA assistantship package. Most – though not all – assistantships include university-provided health insurance.

[17] While I didn't have any car payments for the first 8 months I was in Knoxville, I did have to place a down payment of about $2000 on the vehicle that I leased after my car was totaled. To avoid even further complicating the financial picture, I just treated this sum as if it were another 8 months' worth of $300 payments.

expenses. One the other hand, since I was single and valued my privacy, I paid my bills on my own income and never reduced my rent by splitting expenses with someone else. Depending on what program you are attending, your stipend could be higher or lower than what mine was, and depending on where you live, your cost of living might be higher or lower as well.

Ultimately, whether you will be able to make ends meet without taking out loans during graduate school will depend on many variables. The point of this financial exercise is to highlight the benefits of careful money management. In what follows, I'm going to propose a few general rules that will make living within your means easier. I will also outline a simple system for keeping track of your earnings and expenses.

First and foremost, take advantage of the financial resources available to you. Here are a few applications of that general principle:

> **Travel Rule**: If you are eligible to have your travel reimbursed, then apply for reimbursement.

> **Fellowship Rule**: If you are eligible for a departmental or national fellowship that has relatively minimal application requirements, then apply for that fellowship.

> **Prize Rule**: If you are eligible for a monetary prize or award offered by your department or a professional organization, then apply for that prize or award.

This may sound obvious, but you would be amazed at how frequently graduate students simply fail to apply for money that they might be able to get. Don't be one of those graduate students. Here's one more variation of this rule that is not quite as obvious:

> **Credit Rule**: Acquire a credit card with no annual fee and a lucrative reward points program.[18]

Many credit cards have reward programs where you can get a certain percentage of cash back on your purchases. These programs are designed to incentivize people to pay for more things with their credit cards. This means that people will usually pay interest on a greater sum of money at the end of the month than they otherwise would. However, this system can work to your advantage if you pay off the balance on your credit cards at the end of every billing cycle (ensuring that you pay no interest). If you do this correctly, you will essentially get money back with no additional expense. Let's consider an example.

Suppose you have $1000 worth of student fees to pay. You could pay with a check, or you could pay with your credit card. Your credit card offers 1.5% cash back on all general purchases, so you would get $15 worth of cash back rewards for this purchase. If you have a significant

---

[18] I will leave it up to you to determine which card best suits your spending habits, but in my experience, Chase has the best credit cards that fit this description. Chase rewards points can be redeemed for a direct bank deposit (if you have a Chase banking account) or a check mailed to your address. Not all credit card reward programs allow you to redeem your reward points directly for cash in such a straightforward fashion, and usually when you get reward points as Amazon credits or discounts at other stores, you're only redeeming the points at 70–80% of their value.

amount of available credit, then you should make the purchase with your credit card and pay off the balance on the card at the end of your billing cycle. The result is that you will effectively save $15 on this purchase compared to paying with a check or debit card. Some rewards cards also have higher reward rates for certain categories of purchases, which can net a much larger portion of cash back if used properly.

Iterated over several years, diligent use and management of a cashback credit card could net you thousands in savings, and having a credit card with a long history of on-time payments is also a good way to improve your credit score. Of course, this strategy only works if you manage your spending responsibly and pay off your balance in full every month. If you think you may not be able to maintain that level of financial diligence, then paying with funds directly from your bank account might be a better strategy.

Even if you opt not to use a credit card, you will still need to monitor your spending carefully. That brings us to perhaps the most important rule:

Tracking Rule: Keep track of your monthly income and expenses.

Your method of keeping financial records does not need to be fancy or impeccably detailed. It can be done quite effectively with a simple spreadsheet. Here's a template based on the system I used for most of graduate school:

	Income	Rent	Utilities	Car	Credit Cards	Other	Total
Aug 2019	$1300	$520	$100	$310	$300	$0	$70
Sept 2019	$1300	$520	$100	$310	$350	$0	$20
Oct 2019	$1300	$520	$100	$310	$750	$50	-$430
Nov 2019	$1300	$520	$100	$310	$1100	$0	-$730
Dec 2019	$1500	$520	$100	$310	$300	$0	$270
Jan 2020	$2000	$520	$100	$310	$265	$1000	-$195
Grand Total							**-$995**

In this system, the leftmost column designates a particular month during the calendar year. The other columns represent the following information:

- **Income**: all income for the given month
- **Rent**: monthly rent or mortgage payment
- **Utilities**: all monthly utility expenses, which could include (among other things) electricity, water, pest control, cable, internet, and cell phone expenses
- **Car**: monthly car payment
- **Credit Cards**: the sum of all expenses paid for with credit cards that have not already been counted in the Rent, Utilities, or Car columns
- **Other**: any expenses not included in the other categories
- **Total**: financial net balance for the month, which can be calculated by subtracting all expenses from Income

The numbers I have used in this example are just hypothetical but could approximate what someone's 6-month spending looks like. This particular graduate student has a standard stipend of about $1300 per month (after taxes are withheld), a $520 monthly rent payment, a $100 monthly utility payment, and a $310 monthly car payment. During this 6-month stretch, the student traveled to a conference in November and also traveled back home for the holidays in December, which is reflected in the rise of credit card expenses during that stretch. After the holiday break, the student got some additional spending money as a Christmas gift and got some of their travel expenses (for the conference) reimbursed. But in January, they also had to pay their 6-month premium for auto insurance and some student fees associated with their graduate education – expenses that totaled $1000.

Overall, during these 6 months, this grad student lost nearly $1000. If this stretch is representative of their typical spending habits, then they will need to either pursue summer teaching to generate additional income or cut back on some of their expenses somehow. Keeping a monthly tally of income and expenses like this helps you see patterns in your spending that could prove problematic in the long term. It also provides a concrete sense of how well you are managing to live within your means.

In practice, your spreadsheet will probably be more complicated than the one that I have sketched. You may want to break down your expenses into more categories, and your expenses may be more variable than they are in my example. Even so, the basic strategy is the same: use your monthly statements to keep track of your income and expenses so that you have a clear picture of whether you are living in a way that is sustainable on your current income. Update and review this information at least once a month. If you maintain an Excel Spreadsheet or [Google Sheet](#) with appropriate formatting, then this process should not take more than 10–15 minutes of your time each month. Given the importance of a keeping close eye on your finances, this is time well spent.

Now imagine that you're in a situation similar to the grad student from my example. You don't want to increase your teaching load or take on a non-academic part-time job because these things would take significant time away from your graduate studies. And you don't want to take out any student loans because that's likely to saddle you with a lot of debt after you graduate. In that situation, your only remaining option is to reduce your expenses. One possibility would be to move somewhere with lower rent, but opting for the cheapest possible apartment complex will not always land you in a safe neighborhood or provide an environment conducive to being a productive scholar or having an acceptable quality of life. Let's suppose that you aren't willing to move to a cheaper apartment. Now is the time to consider my last rule of frugal living:

Moderation Rule: Limit your recurring, non-essential expenses.

Many graduate students spend a lot of money on things that they enjoy but do not strictly need. Some common examples include cigarettes, alcohol, coffee, movies, videogames, and going to restaurants. In many cases, expenses tied to these habits can be reduced without diminishing your quality of life. Could you survive with fewer glasses of wine each month? Could you pack your

own lunch each day instead of buying it on campus? Could you wait a few months to get that new videogame when it isn't quite so expensive? If you ask these questions about a lot of your habits, you'll probably discover some areas where you can reduce your expenses without altering your lifestyle in any major way.

Do note that this rule only suggests *limiting* these expenses. I am not advocating that you live like a miser and never purchase anything beyond the essentials – the point is to be cognizant of where you can make cuts to your expenses without radical changes to your way of life. If you want to try a radical lifestyle change (e.g., quit drinking, give up television), I'm not going to stop you, but the Moderation Rule doesn't require it. Similarly, the Moderation Rule permits the occasional vacation or significant expense. Maybe your favorite band is having a concert soon or you want to spend a special evening with your spouse to celebrate your anniversary. That's fine as long as these kinds of expenses are reserved for special occasions.

Before concluding this section, I want to stress the importance of adopting these small measures to manage your expenses. Failing to curtail excessive spending or consider the long-term consequences of taking out student loans will put you in a much worse position when you approach the completion of your program. If employment is eluding you, looming debt payments may compel you to take on low-paying adjunct work that you would rather not do. Even if you secure a position, paying off your debts sooner will enable you to save money more quickly, making it easier to, say, afford a down payment on a new home or purchase a new car. Moreover, debts are almost always an additional source of stress. You will be much better off in the long run if you take a conscientious approach to your spending and monitor your finances carefully.

Staying Positive

Let's take stock for a moment. During graduate school, you will have a lot of different commitments, and you will live on a very modest stipend. Many graduate students leave the program without their degree, and if you do manage to finish, it will probably take 7–8 years of your life. On paper, this may not sound like a great situation.

Moreover, if you spend much time in the academic blogosphere, you'll probably notice that a lot of people in academia are not all that happy. Some are stuck in adjunct positions and [growing frustrated with their circumstances](#), some associate professors [remain unhappy even after they've gotten tenure](#), and given the relative rarity of external validation in academia, it's easy to develop a [pernicious tendency toward self-criticism](#). All this can lead you to conduct your graduate studies with a pronounced sense of dread. You may wonder, "Am I really going to endure a life of stress and worry in graduate school just to experience [another life of worry](#) after I get my PhD?"

I'll cover some aspects of making academic life more enjoyable in [Part 13](#), but here are a few general pointers to keep in mind:

- **Remember the positives**. Graduate school can be difficult, but it is also one of the few times in your life where you'll be surrounded by lots of smart people working on the same issues and ideas that you are.[19] You will also have substantial flexibility regarding how you spend your time and structure your life – far more than if you worked a standard non-academic job. Most importantly, this is your chance to engage with the philosophical ideas that you find most tantalizing, which was probably one of the main reasons you applied to graduate school in the first place.

- **Be your own best friend**. You're going to have your work criticized on many occasions – both verbally and in writing. If you're aware of the facts, you also know that the odds of achieving a long-term career in the profession are not that favorable. Both these factors can make you doubt your aptitude, but the temptation to castigate yourself must be resisted. To the extent possible, take pride in your work and stay confident in your abilities.

- **Maintain realistic expectations**. Don't set unrealizable goals and then be disappointed in yourself if you cannot reach them, and don't expect to meet every deadline or stick perfectly to your projected progress through the program. Now and then something unexpected will happen. It's normal for things to go a little off the rails once in a while, so don't panic or get down on yourself when this happens.

- **Don't feel obligated to finish the program**. At some point in your graduate studies, you may realize that you absolutely hate it. But getting a PhD in philosophy should be something that you're mainly doing for yourself: you don't owe it to anyone to get the degree. So if you don't want to do it anymore, then don't. Life's too short for you to spend years of it feeling bitter and frustrated as you crank out dissertation chapters. Of course, I am <u>not</u> advocating that you drop out of the program as soon as things start to go badly. I just want you to understand that you shouldn't feel like a failure if you eventually decide to discontinue your graduate studies.[20]

- **Don't spend all your time in front of a computer screen**. One of the major mistakes I made during my first few years of graduate school is that I spent too much time at a desk and not enough time on a tennis court. I was a varsity tennis player in both high school and college, and while graduate school required reducing my hours on court, I sometimes let my graduate work consume too much of my time. You may have a different outdoor hobby, but the main idea remains the same: spend some time outside and liberate yourself from screens now and then. It will be better for your health and your mood.

- **If you are being harassed or otherwise mistreated, consider lodging an official complaint**. For minor issues, try to resolve the matter internally by bringing the problem

---

[19] This can also be true if you land a job in a large philosophy department, but in smaller departments, you might be the only person who works in your particular research area.

[20] In <u>Part 15</u>, I spend more time discussing when it might be appropriate to consider leaving your PhD program.

to the chair of the department. That may result in a swift resolution. If the case is extreme or your account is not taken seriously, you may need to reach out to people outside the department. Who you contact will depend on the type of grievance. If you are being sexually harassed, the office that enforces Title IX policies will be your best bet. In other cases, the dean of your college (or their office more broadly), an ombudsperson, your union representative, or your university's victim advocacy center may be your best resource. I must note here that there are often costs to lodging formal complaints – frayed relationships with faculty, additional stress, and emotional turmoil to list just a few possibilities. You are not obligated to do so, and it can sometimes be better to just let something go and do what you can to avoid the problem (e.g., avoid working with the faculty member who is verbally abusive).[21]

Graduate school is not easy, but hopefully you feel capable of facing the challenges that await. One major aspect of dealing with these challenges and adapting to new ones that emerge it tied to your long-term planning. We'll turn to that topic next.

---

[21] Experiences with lodging formal complaints are quite varied – both good and bad. See this discussion at the Philosophers' Cocoon for some examples.

Part 3: The 5-Year Plan

Since graduate school features a lot of competing obligations, there can be a strong temptation to approach your commitments as they arise without thinking too far into the future. In theory, following this strategy can lead to consistent progression and keep you from getting overwhelmed by the big picture, but it often doesn't turn out that way . Focusing on short-term commitments too often causes long-term goals and projects to be neglected.

From the beginning of graduate school – yes, the very beginning – I advocate approaching your graduate education with a 5-year plan in mind. The start of your sixth year is about when you will need to be wrapping up your dissertation and preparing for your first run on the job market.[22] Since your first job market run will dominate your time that academic year, your dissertation needs to be close to complete before you get too deep into the fall semester. And since your job market materials need to be ready before you start submitting your applications, your credentials must be suitably impressive by the start of the fall semester.

To make matters a little more complicated, you don't really have 5 years to build your credentials; it's more like **3 years**. Your first year of graduate school will likely involve a lot of adjustment. You'll be in a new city navigating an unfamiliar program and meeting a lot of new people. You'll be adapting to graduate-level coursework, and trying to learn how to teach effectively. While it is certainly possible to submit papers to conferences in your first year or two, few graduate students will be producing material to send to the American Philosophical Association (APA) meetings or other top conferences so early in graduate school. Even fewer will be able to produce anything of publishable quality at that state of their studies.

In all likelihood, you will not have the time or the skill set to pursue a serious regiment of presenting and publishing your research until you start your <u>third year of graduate school</u>. You will then have a 3-year window to build your research profile (through conference presentations and publications) in preparation for the job market. Your lightening course load will also provide more time to pursue any service commitments that have caught your interest.

When you begin this pivotal 3-year window, you need to have a clear plan for what you want to accomplish, and then you need to put it into action. In this section, we're just focusing on the plan itself – strategies for putting it into action are scattered throughout the rest of the guide. The first thing to consider is what our long-term goals are.

---

[22] Most programs will offer you 5 years of guaranteed funding and possibly 1 more year to finish your degree if you've been doing quality work and making good progress. Sometimes, you can get an additional year by obtaining a graduate fellowship from a source outside the department. In my own case, I took 7 years to finish the degree, and my first year of support was a fellowship from the graduate school. Even then, I was fortunate to get funding my 7th year, which is why I had originally aimed to finish in 6 years. (I got delayed at the dissertation stage, as many grad students do.) You can, of course, aim to finish in 5 years, but it's not easy to pull that off and do the professional development necessary to be competitive on the job market.

What Do You Need to Have Done in 5 Years?

Suppose you want to be competitive for an academic job. You will need to go on the academic job market in the fall before you complete your dissertation. To have a reasonable chance of success in that job search, you should aim (minimally) at the following:

1. A nearly complete dissertation
2. At least two published papers – preferably peer-reviewed articles in respectable journals
3. Evidence of scholarly engagement through conferences, invited talks, etc.
4. A strong and positive online profile
5. Significant solo teaching experience and student evaluations for your courses with scores averaging a 4.0 / 5 in the most important categories
6. Some awards, professional accolades, or other evidence of professional development

Some of these criteria are more essential than others. Virtually everyone I know from unranked or low-ranked programs who has been successful on the job market has had multiple publications prior to their first job market run. In other words, unless you are coming from an extremely distinguished program, having publications is pretty important. Being in position to finish your dissertation is also critical: committees will not give you serious consideration if they doubt that you can finish your dissertation before the job starts. For teaching-focused jobs, a strong teaching portfolio is also crucial.

Conference participation is, at least from the standpoint of getting a job, less valuable than most other items on this list. The main value of going to these events is to get feedback on your work and meet people with similar interests. These benefits can contribute to getting a job indirectly, but virtually no one is hired based on their conference presentations. Similarly, I suspect that few people progress in the job application process primarily due to their awards or professional accolades.

Constructing Your 5-Year Plan

Now that you have an idea of what you should be aiming for at the end of graduate school, you can start to set some intermediary goals that will get you closer to achieving these long-term aims. Here's an example of what that might look like:

Year	Goals
1	Earn A grades in all your courses.
	Present at 1 professional conference.
2	Present at 2 professional conferences.
	Identify at least 1 publishable paper idea.
	Identify journals and CFPs where you might submit papers in the future.

3	Start submitting to journals; develop this into a routine as papers are rejected.
	Present at 2 professional conferences.
	Earn teaching evaluations that average 4.0 / 5 or better; make this your new standard.
	Complete coursework.
4	Earn your first peer-reviewed journal publication.
	Present at two professional conferences.
	Complete comprehensive exams and the language requirement.
	Begin writing the dissertation prospectus.
5	Earn your second peer-reviewed journal publication.
	Pass your dissertation prospectus defense.
	Draft 30-50% of your dissertation.
	Build a personal website and clean up your online profile.

Obviously, what you design might be different than what I've outlined above. You might set loftier goals or prioritize specific goals in a different order. That's fine, but make sure your goals coincide with where you need to be at the start of your sixth year in graduate school.

The 5-Year Plan is not meant to be a source of additional stress or tedium: it's designed to provide a framework for getting things done. You will spend most of your time in graduate school working in relative isolation. It is easy for entire semesters to pass where you are very busy but accomplish little of the professional development that will be necessary for a serious run on the job market. My hope is that having a 5-Year Plan will make it easier to avoid that outcome.

If you are not sure how to get started crafting a 5-Year Plan, I recommend meeting with either your graduate advisor or the director of graduate studies in your program to discuss it. They will be able to provide some insight into what goals are realistic for your abilities and year in the program. Simultaneously, do not be afraid to set ambitious goals: the best goals are achievable but challenging. You want your 5-Year Plan to stretch you to your limits.

Adjusting Your 5-Year Plan

Under ideal circumstances, you will progress through all the goals in your 5-Year Plan without incident and be ready for the job market when you begin your final year of graduate school. But how often does a 5-year interval in our lives go exactly as planned? It is almost certain that something will not go as planned. Maybe you have an unexpected breakup with your romantic partner during your third year or dissertation progress in year 5 stalls or you keep getting your premier paper rejected from journals. Whatever the case, your 5-Year Plan should not be static. When needed, you should make changes to keep yourself on track for the long term.

I recommend reviewing your 5-Year Plan every 6 months. This can be done once in the winter and once in the summer. Take stock of where you are with your goals. If you are on track, then focus on what will be next on your agenda. If you have not been able to meet all your goals so

far, then alter your plans accordingly. Maybe you discover in your second year that your teaching evaluations are not improving, so you want to add a new goal related to teaching for your third year. Maybe you alter your priorities in the middle of year 5 to accelerate your dissertation progress. There is no way to know in advance what adjustments may be needed, which is why periodic review is vital.

Remember that the overall goal of the 5-Year Plan is to keep you focused on the future and help you focus on the short-term goals that will help you reach your objectives in the long term. It is easy to lose track of the big picture amidst the business of coursework, teaching, and departmental events. These 6-month reassessments should help you stay on track. Do not be discouraged if your progress stutters during a rough semester: progression in graduate school is not always linear. What's important is adapting your approach to suit your circumstances.

Part 4: Coursework and Other Program Requirements

This section of the guide covers a wide range of program requirements that you must complete to reach ABD status – the unofficial title given to a graduate student who has complete all requirements for the PhD except completing the dissertation. Parts 5–8 will cover various aspects of research, writing, and networking that should be relevant throughout your graduate studies. Due to the unique challenge posed by completing the dissertation, I have devoted Part 9 entirely to that topic. Teaching, though common, is typically not a program *requirement*: rather, fulfilling your responsibility as an instructor or teaching assistant is a requirement for keeping the financial support tied to your position. Thus, I will not cover teaching until Part 10 and Part 11.

Overview of Requirements

Every program has its own idiosyncrasies regarding its degree requirements, but here are the most common ones among North American doctoral programs:

- Completing 48 hours of graduate coursework with various distribution requirements[23]
- Passing a test demonstrating proficiency in a language other than English – usually Greek, Latin, French, or German
- Obtaining a Master of Arts in philosophy[24]
- Passing comprehensive examinations
- Passing an oral defense of your dissertation prospectus
- Passing an oral defense of your completed doctoral dissertation

As you can probably imagine, being eligible to undertake the dissertation defense requires completing your dissertation.[25]

Before the start of your first semester in the program, you should peruse the graduate handbook and figure out exactly what the program requirements are and what the expected timeline for completion is. If there are ambiguities in anything, ask the director of graduate studies to clarify the matter. You want to know the exact requirements so that you can build them into your 5-year-plan, so clarify anything you do not understand as soon as possible.

In the remainder of this section, I will over a brief overview of the common requirements and some general advice on how to approach them. The lone exception is the dissertation, which I cover extensively in Part 9. Let's start with graduate coursework.

---

[23] There can be some variance in the specific number of required hours, and programs also vary regarding how much graduate coursework you can transfer from another institution.

[24] Not all programs require that you obtain an MA before earning your PhD, but many have the attainment of the MA built into their program – normally in the form of an examination that occurs during the end of the second year.

[25] You may be required to make some alterations after a successful defense based on the comments from your committee members, but these revisions should be minor.

Graduate Coursework

Coursework will dominate your first 2–3 years in graduate school. In some ways, graduate courses are not much different than undergraduate courses: you will read some philosophical material in certain topic area, discuss it with the professor and your classmates, and eventually write a term paper related to the subject of the course. The lone exception to this structure will probably be your course in logic (if your program requires it). A logic course will typically have less reading but daily homework, and your major assessments in that course will be exams rather than a paper.

There are, however, a few important differences in expectations between graduate courses and undergraduate courses worth highlighting:

- You are expected to earn A grades in virtually all of your graduate courses. An isolated B or B+ is not a concern, but repeated grades in that range are an indication of sub-par performance. Any C grades are more-or-less equivalent to failing grades at the undergraduate level.
- For purposes of professional advancement, your graduate GPA is meaningless. Your graduate GPA only matters insofar as frequent non-A grades will raise questions about your philosophical aptitude and could result in a loss of funding in some programs. Graduate GPAs are not typically included on CVs, and no one outside your graduate program will ever ask you about it. You should aim to earn an A in all your graduate courses, but you should not be obsessed with your GPA or expect that a high graduate GPA will confer any professional advantage in the future.
- Graduate courses rarely include any introductory material or informal handholding. You are expected to complete all the readings and have intelligent things to say about the material without the instructor giving you an overview or spelling out the arguments for you in detail. If you are unwilling to do this or incapable of doing so consistently, that is a sign that graduate school in philosophy is probably not the right path for you.
- Grades in graduate courses are usually determined by only 1 or 2 big assessments. In most graduate seminars, grades are determined by the quality of your term paper. You might also be required to give a presentation at some point during the term, and there might be some loosely defined participation grade. But expect the final paper to be at least 60% of your grade for the term.
- It is relatively common to take incompletes in graduate courses. You probably never took an incomplete during your undergraduate studies, but it is an acceptable practice to take incompletes in graduate school, though (as I will discuss shortly) you should be cautious about taking them.

With these things in mind, I should mention that you are probably well-prepared for your graduate courses. You were probably the best philosophy major at your university in the year you graduated, and you probably graduated with a high undergraduate GPA. Because graduate school admissions are so competitive, it is exceedingly rare for someone to be admitted who

cannot handle graduate coursework. Thus, you should not be intimidated by graduate coursework.

Additionally, graduate courses are probably the most enjoyable part of graduate school. You will be in a classroom with a bunch of other people of similar academic ability and with similar interests. The intellectual rigor of the conversations will be much greater than what you have experienced in the past, and you can expect discussions to persist among your peers long after the seminars have ended – in your shared office space, at the library, or at local hangout spots. For these reasons, your coursework should provide an unprecedented opportunity for intellectual growth. They will also provide a means for you to identify subfields of philosophy you want to pursue as areas of specialization.[26]

Since you have to be a fairly capable undergraduate student to gain admission to graduate programs in philosophy, I am not going to provide a list of study tips that might be suitable for undergraduates. I assume you know the basics about how to manage your time properly, get things done, and retain information. I will, however, offer a few pointers that may be useful in the context of graduate coursework:

1. Develop a consistent and effective note-taking strategy. You need a means of identifying important information for future reference when you are attending lectures, conducting your own research, or evaluating material for other purposes (e.g., teaching, prepping for comprehensive exams). I do not think it matters much what particular note-taking style you adopt. I prefer taking notes by hand in most cases because doing so is more effective at helping encode the information into memory, but you may find that the ease of saving and organizing digital notes to be more advantageous. Whatever you opt to do, devise a note-taking scheme as early as possible in graduate school if you did not do so as an undergraduate.

2. Read consistently and efficiently. You will read *a lot* in graduate school. Habits like skimming or skipping assigned readings may not be too problematic at the undergraduate level, but these strategies should be used sparingly in graduate school. A key skill you want to develop is the ability to read and understand philosophy more efficiently so that the task of conducting dissertation research is not utterly overwhelming. You will not develop those skills by trying to take shortcuts in your graduate courses. Identify a time and place each day where you are able to devote a couple of hours to reading and will not be interrupted. You may not always need that much time to read what is on your agenda, but keep that time available every day.[27]

---

[26] While you may begin graduate school with some ideas about what you want to study, these initial interests can change as your graduate studies progress. Even if those initial interests do not change, they will get more refined, and new interests may also develop.

[27] You may be wondering whether learning to speed read could help manage the reading load. The problem is that "speed reading" as it is usually pitched in trade books – a set of techniques that can double or triple your reading speed – is a myth. Reading speed can be improved but not with so-called speed-reading techniques. The available research shows that people simply cannot read at the reported speeds (sometimes 1000 words per minute or more)

3. <u>Read actively</u>. Active reading involves engaging with the reading material with an intent to remember content and evaluate its relevance. It may involve underlining key passages, highlighting important references, making annotations, and a host of other things. You may have been able to manage during your undergraduate studies without doing this much, but you will need to attain a higher level of comprehension in graduate school. Experiment with different techniques in your first semester of graduate school – ideally in conjunction with developing your note-taking system – and figure out a strategy for active reading that ensures you retain the core ideas and arguments from the scholarship you read.

4. <u>Come to class with a couple of questions to ask</u>. Graduate seminars in philosophy are usually driven by discussion. You will make better contributions to the conversation if you have prepared a few questions before class. Thinking about what questions you might ask will also help you read the material with a critical eye and identify weaknesses in the arguments.

5. <u>Take incompletes sparingly</u>. It is very rare for undergraduates to take incompletes, but it is more common in graduate school. Typically, taking an incomplete will not result in any penalty, and professors are usually willing to provide these extensions. It does not sound like a bad arrangement in the abstract: you get a bit more time to finish your paper for the course and do not need to complete it while also grading end-of-term material as a teaching assistant. However, taking incompletes is usually a bad idea: it extends work that should be completed during the semester into the next term or the summer. In that manner, taking incompletes facilitates procrastination. It can also be difficult to clear incompletes the following semester while trying to keep up with your current courses. For these reasons, I recommend having no <u>more than 1 incomplete</u> on your record at once and <u>only taking incompletes in the spring semester</u> (or equivalent if on the quarter system) so that you can clear your incomplete during the summer.

6. <u>Get to know your professors</u>. You can succeed at the undergraduate level with only rather superficial relationships with your professors, but that will not work in graduate school. In the long run, you will need professors to serve as members of your MA thesis or doctoral dissertation committees. As I will cover [later](), your dissertation advisor can make a huge difference to how well that process goes. Use your coursework as a way to learn which professors might be good candidates for serving as your dissertation advisor. Beyond that, your professors will be your best source for feedback on your work and advice on how to approach your graduate studies. Be proactive in visiting their office hours and discussing your work with them.

7. <u>Aim to write (potentially) publishable material</u>. Publishing is critical to your future job prospects, so a central aspect of your graduate courses should be attempting to generate material that could one day (usually after many revisions) be published. Even in the ideal

---

[while maintaining comprehension](). Reading more philosophy has no value unless you understand the central ideas and arguments, so do not waste your time trying to learn to speed read: it will not help you.

scenario, it is doubtful that your term paper in a graduate course will be ready to send to journals, but you can certainly produce a paper that will be ready to submit after a round or two of extensive revisions. That should be your goal.

One of the central challenges to producing publishable material is identifying an idea that is original enough and defensible enough to survive the blind review process at a respectable academic journal. Coursework lends itself well to generating these ideas, so that is the topic we will cover next.

Generating Ideas for Publishable Papers

Early in your graduate studies, it can be easy to think that you will not be able to make any original contributions to philosophical discourse. It may seem that many of the most important and fundamental questions in philosophy have been explored so thoroughly that only someone with a ludicrous amount of knowledge can have something new to say about them. Fortunately, that's not the case. You will need some familiarity with the background literature on whatever subject you are researching, but even when engaging with the most widely read works of philosophy (such as the writings of Plato or Aristotle), there are still novel observations to make and new arguments to propose.

A graduate seminar provides an ideal opportunity to get a foothold in the literature on an important topic. You will read a curated list of readings that (assuming your professor is knowledgeable about the subject) represent some of the most important publications on the topic. When it is time to write your term paper, identify a topic that captures your interest and dive deeper into the recent discourse on it. Look for areas of debate where ideas are relatively underdeveloped, and think about what you might add to the discussion. Is there an objection that no one has yet considered? Is there a possible view that has not yet been plausibly defended? Is there an implication of an existing position that has not been explored? If you are not able to find a clear path for pushing the discourse forward, ask your professor for suggestions (after explaining to them what you have learned about the literature you have investigated).

If this general strategy does not prove useful for generating publishable ideas, here are some other methods that might work for you:[28]

1. Find a paper in the literature that you think is mistaken. Write up why you think it is mistaken and consider how you think proponents of that position would respond.
2. Pick a paper you read during the semester that caught your interest, and look it up on Google Scholar. See what recent literature cites that paper, and read the abstracts of those papers to get a sense of what has already been said about it. Then figure out what you might say about the paper that others have not yet covered.

---

[28] The strategies listed below are in part derived from discussion associated with this post at The Philosophers' Cocoon.

3. Focus on writing your paper first, and then situate it in the existing literature afterward. Note that situating your paper in the literature could involve a substantial amount of expansion or revision is your main idea has already been written by someone else.
4. If you work in a field where empirical findings affect the discourse (e.g., applied ethics, philosophy of science, philosophy of technology), then investigate the recent empirical developments in the field and see if there is something relatively new that philosophers have not yet addressed in depth.

Regardless of what methods you adopt to identify publishable ideas, not all of your term papers will develop as you expect. In some cases, you will eventually discover that you actually do not have much original to say about the topic despite all your research on it. In others, the idea might be promising, but you might struggle to make the argument work when you get into the writing process. In those cases, you might just elect to write the papers to meet the requirements of the course and leave them alone afterward. That's okay – you are not going to strike gold with all of your ideas. Moreover, even a flawed paper (that would not be suitable for publication) can be more than sufficient to earn an A in a graduate seminar. Do not strive to make all your seminar papers exemplary: reserve that level of intellectual effort for your best ideas, and be willing to satisfice on other projects. Your overarching goal for graduate coursework should be to generate *a few* paper drafts that you can work up to publishable quality. It's great if you can generate more than that, but at this early stage of your graduate studies, it is not necessary.

Before concluding this section, I will add one further piece of advice: keep a notebook (or something similar) where you record potential paper ideas when they occur to you. Ideally, you should write this information down as soon as possible after you have the idea so it is not forgotten. Most of your ideas will never turn into something publishable, so you want to think of – and write down – a lot of them. This follows advice attributed to 2-time Nobel prizewinner Linus Pauling: the best way to get a good idea is to have lots of ideas and discard the bad ones.[29] Pauling was a physicist, but the sentiment is equally applicable in this context.

The Master's Thesis

Some programs will require that you obtain an MA on your way to the doctoral degree. That may require completing a thesis, or it could require complete some form of comprehensive exam in place of a thesis. The MA thesis bears some similarities to writing a doctoral dissertation, but it is far less demanding in terms of both expected length and expected quality. Usually, the expectation for an MA thesis is that it will be completed within 1 or 2 semesters of work (depending on how the program is structured). The particular requirements of the thesis will vary significantly depending on the program and the preferences of your committee members. In some programs, it will only be a bit longer than a standard journal article; in other cases, it might be substantially longer. If it is just designed to be a longer-than-average, high-quality paper, then

---

[29] The original source of this quote appears to be a presentation by Francis Crick titled "The Impact of Linus Pauling on Molecular Biology" delivered at Oregon State University in 1995.

no special methods are necessary for completing it, though the approaches to techniques for approaching research and writing covered in Part 5 may be helpful. If your thesis needs to be substantially longer, then you may also want to consult Part 9 for information on the dissertation. Most of that advice also applies to writing a thesis.

If you opt to pursue an MA without writing a thesis, you will take an exam instead. These examinations usually resemble the comprehensive examinations required before you can begin work on your dissertation, so let's cover those next.

Comprehensive Examinations

Like many other program requirements, the specifics of comprehensive examinations vary across programs. There are generally four formats for these examinations:

1. An oral examination over a fixed reading list
2. A written examination over a fixed reading list
3. An oral examination over subject matter in graduate courses you have taken and/or the subject area of your dissertation
4. A written examination over subject matter in graduate courses you have taken and/or the subject area of your dissertation

Some departments also do combinations of these such that your comprehensive exams will have both a written and oral component. (In those cases, the oral exam may involve faculty members following up on answers you provided in the written portion of the exam.) If your comprehensive exams are drawn from a fixed reading list, then you should obtain a copy of that list early in your graduate studies and integrate studying those texts into your 5-year-plan as needed. It is unlikely you will study all texts on the list through your graduate coursework. If your comprehensive exams are based on your graduate coursework and chosen area of study, you should be able to wait until the end of your coursework to begin your preparations (since you should already have significant familiarity with the possible exam material).

While comprehensive exams can be stressful, they are not typically major hurdles for graduate students. Oral exams are often more akin to lengthy philosophical conversations – they are intellectually rigorous but nothing beyond your ability if you have spent time attending department colloquiums, presenting at conferences, and participating in discussions during your graduate seminars. The written exams usually require that you provide lengthy responses to essay questions, but writing philosophy in this manner should be easy if you have advanced to this point in the program. For these reasons, it is very rare to hear of students failing their comprehensive examinations. If you remain nervous about them, ask the ABD students in your department how their comprehensive examinations went and get some tips on how to prepare for them.

Some programs do not have these kinds of comprehensive examinations and instead require that you produce a paper (often called a "qualifying paper" or "bridge paper") of near-publishable

quality before beginning work on your dissertation. If you are in one of these programs, your goal should be to produce a paper you could submit to a high-quality professional journal. If you are allowed to revise a seminar paper to meet this requirement (which is typical), pick one of your strongest papers. Then begin the process of revising and refining it. The strategies for writing and revising in [Part 5](#) and [Part 6](#) should apply to this paper just as much as they do to any other paper you write with the aim of eventually publishing it.

The Foreign Language Requirement

Your doctoral program may have a language requirement you will need to complete before you can begin work on your dissertation.[30] Usually, you will need to demonstrate proficiency in at least one of the following: Greek, Latin, French, or German. Most often, this proficiency is demonstrated by passing a departmental exam in one of those areas. The most common format for that exam is a translation exercise where you convert a short passage (about 1000 words) from your chosen language into English under a time limit (usually 2 or 3 hours) and without the use of a dictionary. Alternatively, some programs may allow you to fulfill this requirement by completing a certain number of courses in that foreign language for credit. The best strategy for meeting this requirement is to pick a language you have studied previously and refine your understanding of it further until you are ready to take the department's exam.

If you are not keen on studying one of these languages, explore alternative ways to meet the requirements. In some cases, departments will allow proficiency in other languages to count for meeting the language requirement. Your department may also have a way to meet the requirement without studying another language at all, such as taking additional graduate courses or learning formal research methods.

If your program has a foreign language requirement, figure out how and when you are going to meet that requirement and integrate those details into your 5-year-plan accordingly.

What If I Am Struggling?

When I was in my first semester of graduate school, one of my incoming cohort had a rough time during his first two months in the program. He never attended department events or graduate student get-togethers, rarely spoke in class, and appeared unhappy and disengaged. Midway through October, he disappeared completely, and I later learned he had withdrawn from the program. I originally thought this graduate student had left the program prematurely, but I now think it might not have been a bad decision at all. Let me explain why.

---

[30] Since starting my graduate studies in 2010, many programs have eliminated this requirement, but it is still rather common. Furthermore, for those writing a dissertation in certain subjects, it will be regarded as essential. For instance, if you want to write a dissertation on Plato, you will need to know Greek so that you can read and examine his original writings in that language. If you want to write a dissertation on Kant, you will need to know German for the same reason.

There are two natural places to exit a PhD program: after obtaining your PhD or after opting for a terminal MA (either because you are looking to transfer to a different program or are opting not to continue for several more years in pursuit of the PhD). Both immediately follow the conferral of a degree. But there is also a third place where exiting a program can be a reasonable thing to do: during your first semester. Some people enter philosophy without understanding what level of intellectual rigor it will require or what they will need to do in graduate school to be competitive on the academic job market. It is possible for someone to learn these things in their first semester of graduate school and not want to continue. To reiterate a previous point, graduate coursework is often the easiest and most enjoyable part of graduate school – it is the most structured, least pressurized, and most social stage of your graduate studies. If this part of graduate school is difficult or miserable, things are likely to get worse for you rather than better.

I am not encouraging you to give up if things are difficult at first. I think most graduate students should at least see things through until they could acquire a terminal MA. This gives you a little more time to assess how well you are doing and provides a means of at least getting a new academic credential at the end of your journey. That said, laboring for a couple of years in abject misery to obtain an MA may not be worth it to you, and the more you commit to this path of study, the harder it can be to abandon it. Although philosophers may better understand the poor logic tied to the sunk cost fallacy, we are not immune to its psychological pull. Graduate school in philosophy has significant opportunity costs – the time spent in the program is time you could be getting a different education or starting a different career. Thus, if you are going to go in a different direction with your life, it is better to do it near the start of your graduate studies rather than many years later.

I have no idea what happened to my peer that dropped out of the PhD program after half a semester, but I suspect he realized that he did not want to pursue graduate school in philosophy further. If that's true, then it was surely better for him to leave the program in his first semester rather than 4 or 5 years later. He may well have been exercising good judgment when he made that choice.

I hope your early years of graduate school go well, but if you're miserable and struggling, there is nothing wrong with pursuing other things. For further discussion of leaving a program or pursuing nonacademic employment, consult Part 15.

Part 5: Research and Writing

A significant portion of your graduate studies will focus on conducting philosophical research. Some of this will occur during your coursework, but most of it will occur as part of thesis or dissertation work. Additionally, you will need to demonstrate your skill as a researcher by publishing some material if you are to be competitive on the job market. Thus, Part 5 focuses on how to pursue philosophical research and become a productive writer. However, it does *not* cover how to convert your written material into publications: that topic is covered in Part 6.

How Much Should You Read?

As I mentioned in Part 4, I do not recommend skimming or otherwise taking shortcuts when reading material assigned for your graduate courses. That reading material should be used to hone your philosophical reading abilities and improving the efficiency of your comprehension. You also need to read that material carefully to participate effectively in seminars. Standards for what you read and how you do it are very different when it comes to your own independent research, however.

The amount of philosophy you could read – even on relatively niche topics – is vast and could occupy you for many years. Thus, one of the biggest challenges in approaching philosophical research is determining how much you should read before trying to write a paper. A fair amount of knowledge about the subject is essential to not only speaking intelligently about the topic but also to identifying where you might make a contribution that advances the literature. So how much should you read? This question does not admit of a simple answer, but here are is a method for approaching your research that might help[31]:

1. <u>Begin by just skimming the literature</u>. When skimming, just read the abstracts of articles. Your goal at this stage should be to get a sense of what topics are being explored in the relevant area.
2. <u>When you have a sense of what topic you want to investigate, read a handful of articles on that topic</u>. At this stage, keep your reading manageable – no more than 10 articles in total. You want to get a sense not only of what the authors of those papers are arguing for but also who they are responding to and what the big ideas in the literature currently are.
3. <u>After reading about 10 articles in the subject area, brainstorm a thesis you would like to defend, reject, or investigate further</u>. This step is crucial because it provides a means of focusing your reading in the area. Otherwise, you might continue reading indefinitely.
4. <u>When you have a sense of how you might defend or criticize your thesis of interest, write something</u>. You do not need to write a full draft or anything close to it. The point of doing this is that you strengthen the connection between what you are reading and what you plan to write.

---

[31] Some of the steps in this process are borrowed from Marcus Arvan's advice about how much to read when researching a topic.

5. <u>Repeat steps 3 and 4 until you develop the contours of a complete paper</u>. This process may not result in a complete survey of the relevant literature, but it should anchor your writing to a good chunk of what is currently under discussion and without overwhelming you with a near-infinite number of potential sources.
6. <u>Once you have a sense of what the whole paper will look like, finish writing it</u>. Do not drag out this process by reading a bunch of additional material.
7. <u>Fill in gaps in the paper once you have finished drafting it</u>. Once you have a draft, it is worth doing another skim of the literature to see if you have overlooked something that is clearly relevant to your argument. If so, incorporate that source into your draft and cite it appropriately. However, do not obsess over this step: it is not possible to aware of every possible relevant piece of literature, and peer reviewers will typically let you know in their comments if they think you overlooked something important.

As you get more experience engaging with philosophical literature with an eye toward publication, you will develop an intuitive sense of when you have read enough to draft your paper. It is also possible to streamline some of these steps. Articles in the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), the [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), and [Philosophy Compass](#) usually provide thorough topical overviews with extensive bibliographies. These resources can help you identify what work has been most influential in certain areas and what major questions have already been examined.

You should be able to access virtually any literature you want to read through your university library or interlibrary loan. However, in the event that you are unable to access something important (perhaps because your library is not subscribed to a certain journal or database), search websites like [PhilPapers](#), [ResearchGate](#), and [academia.edu](#) to see if the author has uploaded the published version or a draft. Authors may also have drafts of their papers available on their personal websites. If you are still unable to locate a readable version of the material, you could reach out to colleagues or join an online group such as [The Philosophical Underclass](#) on Facebook. This group allows those with limited library access to request copies of articles from other members.[32]

Writing Strategies

There are [a lot of different approaches to writing philosophy](#). I will not attempt anything like a comprehensive survey here. Instead, I will focus on a few common approaches and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. I begin with perhaps the most common approach among prolific writers: **The Daily Routine**.

The Daily Routine follows one of two models: a word-count model and a timed model. Following the word-count model means setting a daily writing goal (in words) and not concluding your work for the day until you meet that goal. This method of writing is favored by

---

[32] The group's rules do prohibit requesting and sharing copyrighted books, though.

many best-selling authors since it focuses on direct output.[33] The alternative version of The Daily Routine sets aside a designated number of hours each day to focus on writing – usually during the same time period each day. You write for the allotted time regardless of your level of productivity.

The Daily Routine is typically a slow but steady approach. You are writing every day and thus making progress every day. It can be especially effective for morning people who can consistently carve out 1 or 2 hours to write at the very beginning of every day or night owls who like to designate a similar amount of time to working every evening. Regardless of when you elect to work, this strategy is only effective if you are able to establish the routine and stick to it. That's a major limitation. Many people's lives do not consistently allow a daily time block for writing. This strategy can also be discouraging if you have frequent disruptions to your schedule: you may feel guilty about not meeting your word quota or completing your writing hours.

My suspicion is that most graduate students are not in the habit of writing a little bit every day.[34] Instead, they tend to write a lot in a short time, usually at the end of the semester. This is an example of **Burst Writing**. As the name suggests, this approach involves producing a lot of content in relatively short time, usually followed by a period of rest. Burst Writing is probably the most common undergraduate writing strategy: many students wait until nearly the last possible moment to begin their assigned papers and then crank them out in a day or two. That particular form of Burst Writing will not work in graduate school because (1) your papers will usually be too long to complete in a single day of work and (2) your papers actually need to be good. If you are an intellectually adept student, it is not that difficult to crank out a half-baked paper in a 6-hour binge that is good enough to get a B+ in an undergraduate course. That will not work at the graduate level (and you should not be satisfied with B-level work in graduate school anyway).

Fortunately, there are better ways to engage in Burst Writing than the way undergraduates typically do it. Here are two more viable ways of using this writing strategy. For the first illustration, imagine that you are taking three graduate seminars during the semester. When the end of the term nears, you need to submit a 6000-word paper for each class. In most semesters, there will be a foreseeable interval when your workload at the end of the term will lighten before the final deadlines pass. One way to approach this situation is to divide-and-conquer these papers one at a time. Assuming you have completed your research and writing preparation, you can devote a few days to each paper – ideally with a day of rest in between each burst. The days of labor may involve 8–10 hours of cognitively demanding work, but when they are over, you are hopefully left with a high-quality result.

---

[33] I first learned of this approach to writing in Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. For some discussion of this approach to writing philosophy, see Marcus Arvan's "How do you write?" or section 4 of Neil Mehta's "A writing guide for professional philosophers."

[34] Much of the evidence also suggests that most professors do not write this way. See Helen Sword's "'Write every day!': a mantra dismantled."

For a second illustration, imagine you have obtained a job with a demanding teaching load. You are in the classroom virtually all day on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and much of Wednesday is lost to teaching prep, faculty meetings, and office hours. With this kind of schedule, a regular routine of Burst Writing could be effective. You write only on Mondays and Fridays but do so intensively for 4–5 hours each of those days. This schedule leaves you free to prioritize your other commitments on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

Burst writing can work well for some people, but it does have drawbacks. For one, not everyone can work optimally for a long stretch of time in the way it requires. Some can write very well for 2 or 3 hours but experience a dramatic decline in the quality of their work beyond that point. Another drawback is that burst writing does not produce output at a steady, consistent pace. Instead, you are producing a lot of content in a relatively short time, taking a break (of sorts), and then producing a lot of content rapidly again. If you miss one or two of your designated writing days or just have a couple unproductive sessions, the impact on your writing output is much worse than if you have an off-day when following the Daily Routine. Nevertheless, this approach to writing can work well if you establish semi-regular burst writing days (or chunks of days) and stick to that schedule.

I will mention a third approach to writing that some people use: the **Inspiration Approach**. Those who adopt this strategy do not approach writing with a set schedule. Instead, they let ideas incubate until inspiration strikes them, and then they seize that moment to produce a large amount of content. There may be something romantic about the notion of the whimsical writer who is mentally whisked away by moments of profound inspiration, but this strategy should not be adopted if your goal is to be an effective academic writer.

There are three major problems with the Inspiration Approach. First, it promotes procrastination: there is too great a temptation to wait for inspiration to strike (whenever that may be) rather than just getting started and making progress. Second, unlike the prior two approaches, this one does not lead to productive writing on any consistent schedule. Waiting for the right inspiration to strike you makes it far more likely that you will not meet deadlines consistently. Third, graduate school in philosophy is not a favorable environment for this writing strategy. Trying to use this approach will result in taking more incompletes in your graduate courses than advisable and making sporadic progress on your dissertation. Both those outcomes are undesirable.

Overall, writing effectively in graduate school requires a more structured and less passive approach than waiting to feel sufficiently inspired. Thus, I advise experimenting with variations of the Daily Routine and Burst Writing strategies. You may not be able to identify what works best for you until you have tried each for an extended stretch of time.

Avoiding Distractions

Whatever time you designate to writing each week, you need to ensure that these hours are generally productive. Minimally, this has two implications. First, you must protect these work hours. Do not schedule anything else during these writing hours: no meetings with students, no social outings, and no other work. Those time blocks are for writing and writing alone. You might think an occasional exception is okay, and disrupting your routine in a genuine emergency is understandable. But the more often you fill your writing hours with a different activity or commitment, the easier it becomes to regard them as optional, which will tank your research productivity. Protect your writing schedule and make it clear to others that you are not available at those times.

The other important aspect of ensuring that your work hours are productive is eliminating distractions from your work environment. I discuss digital distractions at length in a later section, so in this context, I will focus only on those distractions that pose the greatest threat to working effectively during your writing time.

- Noise. Loud noise and overheard conversation can hinder your concentration. If you prefer to work in silence, find a quiet environment like a library cubicle or an office space you have created at home. If that is not possible or you just want to listen to music while you work, invest in a pair of noise cancelling headphones.
- Email. Communicating over email serves a number of professionally useful purposes, but the gradual flow of emails to your inbox during the work day can be a source of continuous distraction. To avoid this problem, schedule a few times a day to check your inbox and (if necessary) respond to emails. You might check once in the morning, once at lunch, and once in the evening. Having this schedule ensures that you do not miss any important professional communications while also ensuring that you do not allow emails to interfere with your writing time.
- Distracting webpages. You will most likely have an internet browser open when you are writing. After all, you may need to look up sources through a library database or double-check an important statistic. Those uses of the internet are perfectly fine. Just be sure you close other browser tabs that could be distracting (especially your email accounts).
- Your phone. Smartphones have become one of society's biggest distractions. While writing, either tuck it in a desk drawer (or somewhere else out of sight) or leave it on silent so that text messages and notifications are not noticeable. If you are expecting an important message, only check your phone at designated breaks in your designated writing time (e.g., the 5-minute break in your 2-hour writing block).
- Socializing. Graduate students are usually provided with some office space, but it is almost never private space. Typically, several desks will be crammed into a large office in an effort to provide workspace for at least 6 people at once. It can be worthwhile to visit these spaces during lunch breaks or in between classes to check in with your peers, but they are usually a poor choice for writing space. The presence of other people creates

a constant temptation to engage in conversation, especially if your writing is not going well or you feel bored. Your best option is to find a more private space to write, but if that proves difficult, then you should try to write in the shared office space at times during the day when it is vacant, which will usually be early in the morning or during the evening.

Beyond the strategies mentioned above, I also recommend informing your peers and professors that you are not going to be available during your writing hours. If they know you are generally not available at that time, they will not expect immediate responses to emails or try to find you in the department during those windows.

Reference Management Software

Every paper you write will have many references, and your dissertation will probably have hundreds of references. Thus, you might think it is worth learning how to use reference management software (RMS). Some of the most well-known options are EndNote, Zotero, Mendeley, and RefWorks. For a philosophy-specific software that integrates with Zotero and Mendeley, you can download Hypernomicon. Some RMS is free; some requires a subscription. Which one is best and whether the paid services are meaningfully better than the free alternatives are both judgments you will have to make for yourself: there is no clear consensus on these matters that I can discern.

Learning how to use this software could save you a considerable amount of time in the long run since you can maintain a database of references and (if the software works correctly) integrate the citations into your writing in various formats. RMS can also make organizing and reorganizing citations easier. However, philosophy journals often have their own idiosyncratic tweaks on conventional citation styles, so you may need to do some editing even after importing the citation. Moreover, sometimes importing the citations into common writing programs such as MS Word or Google Docs does not work as well as one would hope.

Many prolific philosophers do not use RMS, so it is certainly not a requirement for being a productive researcher or effective writer. But I would encourage you to at least give these tools a careful examination to see if you want to use any of them over the long term.

Writing Your Seminar Paper

In almost all your graduate seminars, the final assignment will be a lengthy paper in the general subject area of the course. You surely have some significant experience writing papers from your time as an undergraduate. Graduate seminar papers are generally longer and should be more rigorous and polished than the work of an undergrad, but the basic framework for your papers may well be the same. You will start with an introduction that explains the central topic of your paper and presents the thesis you are going to defend. Then you will present some supporting arguments, respond to objections, and clarify what follows if your conclusions are correct. Or at least most philosophy papers feature those ingredients in roughly that order.

Echoing what I mentioned in Part 4, the expectation for graduate seminars is that you will consistently receive A's. Admissions to graduate school in philosophy are very competitive, so if you have earned a spot in a graduate program, your writing skills are probably more than sufficient for writing A-level papers for graduate seminars. If writing at this level proves to be challenging in your first semester, then you will want to improve your writing skills quickly. Here are some general suggestions for improving the quality of your seminar papers:

1. <u>Revise</u>. At the undergraduate level, you may have been able to earn A's without revising your work much. That is unlikely to be true in graduate school, so you should expect to revise your work significantly and allocate the appropriate time to doing so.
2. <u>Revise again (and again)</u>. Did you think one round of revisions was enough? To be frank, it probably wasn't. Go back and make another round of revisions. Make your ideas clearer, refine your responses to objections, and make sure your conclusion follows straightforwardly from the premises of your argument.
3. <u>Have a non-philosopher read a draft of your work</u>. Once they have finished, ask them if they understood what you wrote. See what they think could have been presented more clearly. Academics (including philosophers) tend to develop an insensitivity to jargon, and having intelligible prose is crucial to writing good philosophy. People cannot evaluate the merits of your argument if they do not understand it.
4. <u>Consult your professor for feedback on in-progress drafts</u>. If you are not sure what objections to treat or how to structure your main argument, a good conversation with your seminar professor might get you on the right track.
5. <u>Ask your professors about how they write their papers</u>. Your professors are experienced at publishing philosophy. Ask them how they do it – when they write, how they choose what to write about, how they structure their papers, and anything else they are willing to share about their writing process. The variance in their approaches may yield new insights into how you want to approach your own philosophical writing.

If you want further guidance writing good philosophy, I recommend reading some guides to academic writing. There is no shortage of these, but here are a few I can recommend:

- Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner, [Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose](#), 2nd ed. (2011)
- Eric Hayot, *[The Elements of Academic Style: Writing for the Humanities](#)* (2014)
- William Zinsser, *[On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction](#)* (2016)
- William Strunk Jr., *[The Elements of Style](#)*, 4th ed. (2022)
- Neil Mehta, "[A writing guide for professional philosophers](#)"

Developing your authorial voice and philosophical writing style will be an integral part of your graduate studies. You will write a lot in graduate school, and writing well is crucial for both finishing graduate school and being competitive of the job market. We will now turn to a different stage of the writing process – trying to get your work published.

Part 6: Publishing Papers

If you're serious about getting an academic job in philosophy, you need to publish some papers. I'd like to tell you that excellent teaching could be sufficient to land you a teaching-focused job, but that's generally not true. The competition for jobs is too great: you will be competing with people who are both excellent researchers and excellent teachers. Being a good teacher will not be enough to differentiate you from the rest of the candidate pool, so you will need to publish some of your research as well.[35]

In fact, publishing is so important to your viability on the job market that [Jason Brennan suggests people should look to start publishing as soon as they start graduate school](). Here's his recommendation for how to approach your first semester of graduate school:

> Get the syllabus from the professor before the semester begins. Read most of the materials before the semester starts. Come in on the first day of your seminar with a draft of your seminar paper. Then spend the entire semester revising that paper. At the end, you might have a publishable article.

He also advises having three papers under review at top journals at all times from the moment you start your second year of graduate school until you have tenure. Now that may sound way too intense to fathom, and I'll explain shortly why this approach is probably too heavy-handed. But it's important to understand why Brennan makes this suggestion. Here's an anecdote he provides about a job search done at his institution:

> We had a job search this year. We received hundreds of applications. The modal amount of time my colleagues and I spent looking at a dossier was about 25 seconds. If the person didn't have any publications, we put him in the discard pile. If the person didn't have good publications–publications with top journals–we put her in the discard pile. Now, it's certainly possible that the most brilliant candidate got discarded in 25 seconds. But we're okay with that. Search costs are high–searches consume a great deal of time. I'm not going to go looking for a diamond in the rough when I have a pile of diamonds right in front of me. I'm not going to go looking to see who has the most hidden potential when I have a pile of applicants with revealed potential right in front of me.

We are still a long way from discussing [the job market](), but this should give you an idea of why you'll need publications. They will often be one of the first screening mechanisms that search committee members use to reject applicants. Without any publications, you will rarely make it past the first round of cuts. The good news is that creating publishable work is not an insurmountable task. Another bit of good news is that you don't need to submit papers to

---

[35] Every year, there are some people who land tenure-track jobs without having any publications, but it is a rare occurrence and usually only happens to those graduating from the most distinguished programs. So, while it is *possible* to get a permanent job in academic philosophy without any published work, it would be foolish and unrealistic for anyone to expect that outcome.

journals within your first six months of graduate school. If you're able to produce publishable work so soon in your graduate career, then that's great, but I suspect that will be beyond the ability of most first-year graduate students.

It is also not necessary to have an absurd number of publications to be a competitive candidate. Publications, at least in the context of the job market, adhere to the law of diminishing returns: as you accumulate more of them, they get less valuable. So, having 1 publication instead of 0 is tremendously valuable, but having 11 instead of 10 would make very little difference to the overall quality of your application. Past a certain number of publications, other factors (e.g., teaching experience, quality / venue of publications, strength of letters of recommendation) will carry greater weight in how your application materials are evaluated. In fact, for some jobs, having an extremely robust list of publications as a graduate student could *lower* your chances of getting the job. At a teaching-focused institution, you may be viewed as a flight risk, and if the faculty on the search committee have relatively meager publication records, they may not want to hire you for fear you will make them look bad in the eyes of the administration.

A further consideration is that the quantity of publications is not all that matters: the *quality* of your publications matters as well. A publication in a top-tier generalist journal could be more valuable to your job prospects than multiple publications in undistinguished venues. Moreover, you want the arguments you publish to be good arguments and hold up well to critical scrutiny. Search committee members might read your published work if you advance far enough in the search process, and if your paper gets some attention in your subfield, you do not want it to be a paper that only gets cited frequently because everyone agrees that it is gravely wrong.

How does one balance all these considerations? Thinking in purely practical terms, if you have 0 publications or just 1, then there is a good chance that your application will not make it past the first round of application reviews. There are simply too many qualified candidates with excellent publication records. But once you have a few publications in hand, it can be reasonable to prioritize other aspects of your graduate education to distinguish yourself from other job applicants if those publications are in good venues. (I will cover what constitutes a "good venue" in a [later section](#).) My general recommendation for most graduate students is to aim for 3 or 4 publications before they go onto the job market for the first time: lots of graduate students with this number of publications land good jobs – including research positions – but this is not so many publications that you will render yourself less competitive for teaching jobs. Furthermore, due to the diminishing returns on the value of publications, the improvement to your marketability afforded by a fifth publication will probably be minimal.

What Should You Try to Publish? And When?

Sometimes, graduate students and other early-career philosophers [wonder if they will be disadvantaged by publishing on obscure, lesser-known topics](#). It is certainly possible to develop a research program on subjects so esoteric that few people on hiring committees will be able to assess its merits, so it is reasonable to think practically when it comes to developing your work

into publishable material. However, trying to just write about what is trendy in philosophy can backfire if those topics are not things that pique your interest. Moreover, just because an issue is discussed less frequently than others in a particular subfield does not mean that it is insignificant. Sometimes quality work on overlooked topics garners attention faster than material that treads across familiar intellectual territory. Moreover, if a topic is underexplored and you wrote a series of papers (or your dissertation) on it, you could quickly become one of the premier scholars in that area.

Ideally, your initial publications should be on topics that have genuinely captured your interest *and* that have the potential to fit into your larger research program (that you will one day summarize in a [research statement](#)). However, it is perfectly fine if you get a publication or two outside of your AOS: this provides evidence of the breadth of your philosophical abilities and can serve as justifiable grounds for claiming subfield of your publication as an area of competence (AOC). It is more important to focus on refining your work into high-quality material than second-guessing whether publishing on that topic (rather than some other one) is the most optimal choice for your career.

So when should you start looking to publish your work? My general recommendation is after the completion of the second year of your doctoral program. (Students who enter doctoral programs with an MA may be ready a bit earlier.) Your first two years of coursework provide time to develop about a dozen ideas in seminar papers, and they also provide time to improve your writing skills. At the beginning of graduate school, most graduate students will not be able to produce material that is of high enough quality to stand a reasonable chance of publication at a quality journal.[36] Thus, the first two years are usually better spent working on your intellectual growth and the general improvement of your philosophical abilities.

Some might object to my advice here. Your time in graduate school is limited, and [(as I will discuss in detail later)](#) it can take years to land a paper in a good venue. Thus, you might think that you should start submitting material to journals as soon as possible. Resist this temptation. Many graduate students believe they are ready to publish well before they actually are.[37] If you get feedback from professors in your initial seminars indicating that you are ready to develop your work into something publishable, then perhaps you are ready earlier than most. But in the absence of that evidence, focus on other things until the end of your second year in the program.

During the summer after your second year of coursework, pick one or two of your best seminar papers, and meet with the professors who taught those courses. Talk with them about what would need to be done to get them up to publishable quality. Do not be surprised if the suggested overhauls are extensive or if they recommend that you read a lot more material. The gap between an A-level seminar paper and a publishable paper can be significant. You also should not be

---

[36] Unfortunately, many graduate students still submit papers for review that are clearly not of publishable quality. Between 40% and 50% of the papers I peer review are not yet close to the quality of publishable philosophical work.

[37] Marcus Arvan echoes a similar thought in [this discussion on the Philosophers' Cocoon](#).

surprised if someone has published an idea similar to yours. That can be okay: you can build on their work or critique it and explain why your argument or position is superior.

However these conversations go, your goal should be to have 1 paper – the most polished and refined paper you have yet produced – under review at a journal by the end of the summer. It is not the end of the world if you need a little more time than that to complete your revisions, but do not dither in getting them done and getting the paper under review. After the completion of your 2nd year in the program, you will have either 2 or 3 years before you go on the job market for the first time (depending on your funding situation, how your dissertation progress goes, etc.).[38] This window – the time between the end of your 2nd year and the start of your first job market run – is when you need to accumulate a few publications. Since you will probably receive a few rejection verdicts before landing your first publication, and since your paper may be under review for months before getting rejected, it could take a year or two to get your paper published even if it is genuinely good. So do not procrastinate on working up your best ideas into publishable material once your second year concludes.

Turning a Seminar Paper into a Publishable Paper

Building on the discussion from the prior section, you might be wondering how you turn that excellent seminar paper into something publishable (beyond the pointers your professor might offer when you talk to them about it). What exactly is the difference between an A-level seminar paper and a publishable paper? It will depend on the subject of the paper, of course, but here are some of the most common features of publishable (or published) papers that separate them from good seminar papers:

- It is clear to the reader what contribution the paper makes to the existing literature. Most seminar papers situate their work in the literature only cursorily or haphazardly. A paper that is ready to send to a journal will do this more rigorously and more accurately.
- The paper engages with the most important objections in the literature and does not misrepresent or shortchange influential views. Seminar papers will treat objections, of course, but they may not treat the most pressing or important objections. Or they might gloss over an important view or implication that needs to be addressed in more depth.
- The paper's introduction is immaculate (or nearly so). The first two pages of a paper are arguably the most important. If they are not good, the paper might get rejected right there, and the reviewer might just skim the rest of it.[39] Thus, a publishable paper should have a precise and compelling introduction – something that immediately conveys to readers why they should bother reading the rest of it. This does not mean the introduction needs

---

[38] Most graduate students will only have guaranteed funding for 5 years, though some may be able to gain additional years of funding from fellowships. Even in favorable circumstances, it is not reasonable to expect funding beyond 6 years, so the spring of your 6th year should be the absolute latest that you are planning to defend your dissertation.

[39] I would like to tell you that your paper will be read in full regardless of the reviewer's impressions of the introduction, but I am not a liar. Remember that reviewing is unpaid service work. If a reviewer immediately suspects that your paper will be bad, they may not think it is worth their time to read the whole thing.

to be flashy or unusual in its structure, but it will clearly explain the significance of the project, the relevant background literature and discourse, and the content of the central argument. It will also be concise – the best introductions get to the point without wasting the reader's time.

▪ <u>The paper is authoritative in its presentation</u>. Graduate student writing is too often characterized by tentativeness and intellectual hedging, as if they are unsure of the merits of their position or whether it would hold up to scrutiny. Published work rarely has this feature. Instead, the author projects confidence in their argument and how they defend it.

▪ <u>The paper considers and addresses the implications of its main argument</u>. Seminar papers do not need to say much about the implications of their arguments for other areas of discourse or for future work in the subfield. But most published work will, and if there are implications that are worrisome, the author will offer a response to those worries.

▪ <u>The paper defines key terms and concepts and features little ambiguity about the author's intended meaning</u>. It can be fine to assume a common understanding of certain terms and concepts in a graduate seminar (where the professor grading the paper presumably knows the subject area well), but published papers will usually make a greater effort to spell out these details. Readers – both reviewers and general readers of the journal – may not be familiar with all the terminology you are using. The terms and concepts you are using may also be contested concepts. For instance, if you were writing a paper that invoked the concept of "epistemic justification," you should clarify what you mean by that term: there are many different accounts of what makes a belief justified, so even readers familiar with the concept will not know what you mean unless you tell them.

▪ <u>The paper avoids excessive synopses and use of quotations</u>. Some seminar papers devote the majority of their words to summarizing exchanges between other philosophers. That can be fine for seminar papers – it certainly demonstrates familiarity with at least one debate in the subject area – but most publishable work focuses on developing the author's original ideas rather than recapping what others have said. Publishable papers are, in general, more concise in their presentation of others' views.

This list should make it clear to you that a significant amount of work is usually required to transform a seminar paper into a publishable paper. Nevertheless, it is also important that you not be obsessed with perfection. Just as there are some graduate students who prematurely think they are ready to start publishing, there are also graduate students who never believe their work is good enough. They keep revising and refining papers for years but never actually submit them for publication. Do not make that mistake.

It can be difficult (especially before you have published anything) to know when your paper is ready to send to journals. One of your professors might give you a recommendation if you let them review a late-stage draft, but even they may not be certain. My recommendation is that you start to submit your paper to journals when your revisions and edits stop making a meaningful difference to the quality of the piece. In my experience, this occurs when you start primarily making what I call "lateral edits" – edits that make marginal changes to the content (e.g.,

changing the wording, tightening the language, alter the formatting) and that do little to meaningfully affect the overall quality of the paper. These edits make the paper slightly different but negligibly better. When you have hit that point, it is time to get that paper under review and move onto something else.

Another consideration is when further meaningful revisions would take you beyond the 8000-word threshold. This tends to be the upper limit for a lot of journals. If you have reached that point and know of a big objection that might occur to readers, you have three options: (1) relegate an existing objection to a footnote, and treat this objection instead, (2) mention the new objection in a footnote and gesture briefly at a response, and (3) go beyond the 8000-word limit and be content to submit to journals that have a higher word limit. In most instances, I think (1) and (2) are better than (3). No paper can treat every conceivable objection, so mentioning that a specific opposing idea is beyond your means to treat fully in your current manuscript is usually acceptable. Just don't make this move frequently – that gives the impression that you are unable or unwilling to engage with objections to your position.

The final step in preparing your paper for publication is writing an abstract. An abstract is a short paragraph – usually 150–250 words – that provides an overview of the content of your paper. The material for your abstract should already be in your paper's introduction. You just need to extract it and reorganize it so that it fits the word limit. You may need to condense or rephrase some of your central claims, but if your paper is truly ready for publication, it should not be difficult to identify your core idea and explain it succinctly.

The most important feature of your abstract is that it clearly expresses your paper's thesis and main argument. Abstracts are usually what editors send to potential reviewers with invitations to peer review manuscripts. If you misrepresent what your paper is about in the abstract, you increase the odds that you will get a reviewer who is not an expert on that subject. Additionally, should your paper be accepted for publication, a poorly written abstract may cause fewer people to read or download it.

Where Should You Publish?

When you have finally worked a paper up to publishable quality, you must decide where to send it. If publication were a certainty, then you would want to send your paper to the best journal possible, which would typically be one of the top-tier generalist journals. During my time in the profession (2010–Present), the top 5 journals – at least according to collective professional opinion[40] – have not changed, though there has been some fluctuation in their order:

1. Philosophical Review
2. Nous
3. Philosophy and Phenomenological Research
4. Mind

---

[40] For one recent example of journal survey results in philosophy, see [this post on Leiter Reports](#).

5. Journal of Philosophy

Beyond these, many other general journals are also quite good:

- Australasian Journal of Philosophy
- Philosophical Studies
- Philosophical Quarterly
- Philosopher's Imprint
- Analysis
- Synthese
- Canadian Journal of Philosophy
- Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society
- Philosophical Quarterly
- Pacific Philosophical Quarterly
- Ergo
- Erkenntinis
- European Journal of Philosophy
- Journal of the American Philosophical Association

This is not an exhaustive list of good general journals, and there are also many specialty journals that are well-regarded both in their subfields and in the profession more broadly.[41] There are also journals that, while less distinguished among the profession as a whole, are well-regarded in their subfields. Publications in those specialty journals could be assets on your CV if you apply for jobs in these subfields.[42]

Given the wide range of possible publication venues, how do you determine which journals to select? Here are a few viable strategies you can use:

- <u>See where influential papers in your subfield are published</u>. When developing your own work, pay attention to patterns in where influential papers on your topic appear. It's a safe bet that your paper will be a good topical fit for those journals, and your paper would stand a good chance of being read and cited if you got it published in one of them.
- <u>Consult journal rankings, and start sending your paper to ones that are highly ranked</u>. If you want your paper to get into the best broad venue possible, you can just select the best journals that typically publish papers in that area and send your paper to them until it lands somewhere. This can take a long time, especially since some of the best journals can have long review times, so I would not advise following this strategy if you need to a

---

[41] The journals *Ethics*, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, and *British Journal of Philosophy of Science* are a few prominent examples, but there are many others.

[42] Many areas of applied ethics fit this description. A publication in the *Journal of Business Ethics* may not count for much if you are applying for a job with an open area of specialization, but it would carry some weight if you were applying to a job with a desired specialization in business ethics. Similarly, a publication in *Environmental Ethics* or *Environmental Values* would help your credentials greatly when applying for a job in environmental ethics but would not be as helpful in making you more competitive for jobs in other areas.

get a publication soon (e.g., if you are going on the job market in less than 1 year). You can also consult online resources like the Philosophy Journal Insight Project, the APA Journal Survey, and the Crowdsourced Philosophy Journals guide to learn about the estimated review times of journals and try to avoid submitting to journals where your paper is likely to be under review for an unusually long time.[43]

- Ask your professors where they publish work in the general topic area of your paper. If you are struggling to identify a suitable publication venue on your own, you can always consult your professors for advice. If they have tenured positions at R1 universities, they publish regularly, so they should have some insight into places that would be good fits for your topic.

Whatever strategy (or strategies) you use to find suitable publication venues, you should have many journals on your list. There is a good chance your paper will be rejected from the first few places you send it. In some cases, it will be desk rejected, and you will not even receive any feedback on your material. In those cases, you should generally just send it to the next journal on your list. (If this happens many times in a row, you may need to revisit the draft and see if there is some significant problem that you overlooked.)

Now, despite the frequent rejections one will receive from the top general journals, some nonetheless believe that those are the only venues you should target. The rationale behind this suggestion is that a single exceptional publication trumps a handful of less prestigious ones. However, despite the common thought that publishing in less distinguished venues hurts one's chances on the job market, there is increasing evidence that publications help one's competitiveness on the job market even when the publication venues are not very distinguished.[44] In fact, publishing too often in elite venues can make you *less* competitive for certain types of jobs. Those who work at teaching-focused institutions are likely to view you as a flight risk if you publish abundantly in top journals.[45] They will question whether you will really be happy in a teaching-focused job where you have less time for research and where it carries less weight in tenure and promotion. It may be true that publishing in venues that are perceived as "weak" by most in the profession will diminish your chances of obtaining jobs at research-focused institutions, but these kinds of publications will help your pursuit of teaching-focused jobs. The key insight here is that where you attempt to publish should in part be determined by what kinds of jobs you intend to pursue at the end of your graduate career.

---

[43] Discussions about this subject come up often in the blogosphere, but the tendencies of journals shift over time due to changes in the editorial boards, the topical scope of the journal, and so on. If you investigate some of the older discussions of this issue, be aware that the reported trends may no longer be accurate.

[44] Marcus Arvan has presented some of the most compelling evidence for this claim. See, for instance, his summary of some job market data from 2012 and his more recent discussions of this topic from 2019 and from 2021.

[45] Marcus Arvan offers an intriguing hypothesis about this phenomenon. He posits that some graduate students from mid-tier or lower-ranked programs may not be competitive for research-heavy jobs due to prestige bias and that these same graduate students can inadvertently make themselves non-competitive for teaching jobs by publishing too often in venues that are *too* prestigious. Doing so makes them look like they are more focused on research and would be flight risks for the hiring department.

Once you have identified suitable venues, my general advice to graduate students is to submit to a combination of top-tier general journals, mid-tier general journals, and specialty journals. You can send some papers – perhaps the work that covers broader topics – to top-tier general journals (hoping to land one of them in a very distinguished venue) and then to mid-tier general journals if you get rejected from some of the top venues. Meanwhile, you can send papers narrower in scope or more focused on a niche topic to specialty journals. Submitting all your work only to the highest ranked journals is a high-risk strategy: there is a good chance that you will face a continuous stream of rejections from these journals.[46] This outcome could lead to the worst-case scenario – going on the job market with no publications. Your chances of getting published in a specialty journal or a less distinguished general journal are higher, particularly if your paper is a good fit for the aims and scope of the journal, so sending some of your work to them increases your odds of avoiding that worst-case scenario.[47] And, to reiterate an important point from earlier, publishing in lower-prestige journals typically helps job candidates overall, so you are not disadvantaging yourself by securing a publication in a good specialty journal.

Before continuing, I should mention one type of publication that really is worse than no publication at all. At some point in your graduate career, you may receive an email expressing interest in your work and offering to publish your work in a journal you have never heard of. These "offers" typically include a cursory mention of an article processing fee and a promise of swift publication. These are predatory journals, and for a wide array of scholarly and ethical reasons, you should not publish in these venues. They typically have no legitimate peer review process, and the article processing fee is a scam to extort money from desperate academics. Additionally, publishing in these kinds of journals (if they really do publish submissions) will make your work harder for other scholars to find and raise red flags for members of search committees evaluating your CV. For some advice on identifying and avoiding these journals, see Susan Elmore and Eleanor Weston's "Predatory Journals: What They Are and How to Avoid Them."

Wherever you decide to submit your paper, be sure that you are comfortable with your choice. Journals expect your work not to be under review at other venues while editors and reviewers are assessing it, and this expectation is usually stated explicitly in their terms and conditions. Once you submit your paper to a journal, you cannot submit it elsewhere until the review process concludes (with your paper being rejected) or you withdraw your submission.

The Peer Review Process

Once you have a paper suitable to send to journals, make one final check of the manuscript to make sure there is no identifying information or other material that would compromise blind

---

[46] As Neil McKinnon notes in his "Publishing Your Philosophy," you are also likely to get rejected from these journals without comments, which makes it hard to improve the quality of your work. This is one of the main reasons McKinnon suggests that graduate students target mid-tier general journals rather than the top-tier ones.

[47] Marcus Arvan has defended this strategy at greater length. See his "Early-career publishing strategies revisited."

review. (Typically, this material would be in the acknowledgements or in footnotes.) If you find any of this information, remove it, and add a short note such as "citation removed for blind review."

Almost all journals nowadays have electronic submission systems. After creating an account and uploading your paper, the manuscript will be sent to one of the journal's editors. Sometimes, the paper is not a good fit for the journal (e.g., because of its topic or scope) or does not appear to be a piece of high-quality scholarship. In these cases, your paper may get what is known as a desk rejection. When this happens, the editor rejects your paper before it even gets sent to reviewers. Usually, if your paper is desk rejected, you will know within a few weeks.

Now let's suppose your paper does not get desk rejected. If that's the case, then the editor will attempt to contact suitable reviewers for your paper. These will typically be people who have published on the same topic – perhaps even some of the philosophers you are citing. Sometimes, getting reviewers to agree is a swift and easy process, but sometimes, it can be difficult. Moreover, some reviewers do not deliver their reports in a timely manner. As a result, the review process can take a long time to complete. Usually, you can view the status of your submitted manuscript through the journal's online system. If several months pass and there is no change in its status, you can kindly ask the editor for an update, but keep in mind that there is often nothing an editor can do to expedite the review process.

Once your article has been reviewed, you will receive one of the following verdicts:

- Accept: the manuscript will be accepted for publication as it is.
- Minor Revisions: the manuscript only needs minor revisions for it to be accepted.
- Major Revisions: the manuscript can be revised and resubmitted, but it would need substantial revisions to be worth publishing.
- Reject: the manuscript is not suitable for publication in the journal and will not be reviewed further.

Some journals have more fine-grained distinctions than just these four categories, but these classifications are pretty standard. Acceptances are virtually never attained on the initial submission. The best verdict you can reasonably hope for is a minor revision. This verdict usually carries a presumption that the paper will be published. That is not the case for a major revision verdict, which means that you might spend a ton of time revising your paper only for it to be outright rejected on resubmission.

Rejection verdicts are the most common outcome – at least at high-quality journals. Most top-tier journals have rejection rates about 90%. In my own reflections on peer reviewing, I have identified the following reasons why I give papers rejection verdicts:

- The paper ignores the relevant, influential literature on the topic.
- The paper does not engage with the most recent literature on the topic – typically the significant developments on the topic that have occurred within the last few years.

- The paper misrepresents or grossly exaggerates the actual conclusions of its central arguments.
- The paper's basic arguments have fundamental and significant problems (such as invalid form or dubious premises).
- The author ignores or casually dismisses important, critical objections.
- The paper is poorly written – well below the standards of publishable scholarly writing. (Papers like this often have long passages that are almost incomprehensible.)
- The paper misrepresents the views of one (or more) of the main authors it critiques.

Just one of these problems would not typically be grounds for rejection, but most papers have more than one of these features. From reading other discussions of this subject, I have gathered that some reviewers will reject papers at certain venues because they believe the paper would be more suited to publication in a different journal (e.g., a more specialized journal, a journal in a different subject area). I rarely reject papers for this reason, but there have been some instances where papers submitted to an "ethics" journal contain virtually no content related to ethics. I certainly rejected those papers in part for that reason. Such submissions usually get desk rejected by editors before making it to reviewers, though.

Many folks get frustrated not just by rejections but also by the length of time a submission is under review. Under the most favorable conditions, you will receive a verdict within 2 or 3 months of your submission. (If you get a verdict faster than that, it is probably a desk rejection and was not actually sent out to reviewers.) Unfortunately, it often takes longer. Delays are not usually a result of editorial incompetence: many potential reviewers may decline the review invitation, and even once reviewers accept the invitation, they may need extended time to complete their reviews.[48] If a paper is under review for longer than 4 months, it can be worth making a short inquiry to the editor about the status of your submission – mostly just to make sure it has not been overlooked or forgotten – but this might not do anything to speed up the review process.[49]

Suppose, however, that you submit a paper to a journal and avoid a desk rejection. The paper gets sent out to reviewers, and they provide feedback to the editor. If your paper is not rejected at this stage, you will almost surely be asked to make revisions and resubmit your manuscript. Usually, you will have 30–60 days to complete this task. If you complete your resubmission, then the manuscript will be sent back to reviewers. Your manuscript can still get rejected at this stage if you do not sufficiently address the reviewers' comments, and it could also be given another revise-and-resubmit verdict. But eventually, if you are diligent enough in trying to

---

[48] As I have discussed in this Philosophers' Cocoon post, reviewers have many reasons for needing more time. Most professors have other professional commitments vying for their time, and peer reviewing is unpaid service work. Some papers also take much longer to review than others.

[49] If a review of your paper takes an absurdly long time, it can be reasonable to withdraw it and submit your work elsewhere. I am not sure how long one should wait to do this, though, since review times of 6+ months are fairly common. Perhaps 9 months under review would be a reasonable time to withdraw your submission if it has not yet been reviewed.

implement the suggested revisions, the paper may be accepted for publication. What happens at that point?

It depends. If you did not submit a paper in the journal's preferred formatting, you may be asked to submit a version that conforms to the journal's style.[50] This task is sometimes performed by a copy editor, but if you are asked to do this yourself, then isolate a few hours during the week to take care of it. The editors will provide some guidelines for what things should look like. Once this version of the paper is submitted, you wait to receive a proof copy – the version of the article that has been typeset according to the journal's formatting guidelines. You will have between a few days and a week to review the proof copy and send any changes to the copy editor. At this stage, changes will be limited to correcting grammatical errors, inaccurate phrasing, and similarly minor mistakes. I advise taking the time to reread your paper carefully and pass along any errors you find. If they aren't corrected at this point, they will be on the published version of the paper forever.

Sometime after the proof copy revisions are submitted to the copy editor, the final version of your paper will appear in a volume of the journal. You can list the paper on your CV as forthcoming as soon as it is formally accepted, but once it is properly published, you can update the entry with the actual volume number and pages.

Revisions and Feedback

One crucial aspect of publishing philosophical work is making revisions in light of reviewer comments. There are generally two types of feedback you will receive. The first type is a set of comments that accompany a rejection verdict. The second type is a list of revisions that should be made before the paper is resubmitted to the journal for another evaluation. Let's consider each case in turn.

Imagine your paper was rejected and the editor included reviewer comments with the rejection. One immediate piece of good news is that you got past the desk-rejection stage – the editor thought your paper was at least good enough to merit a formal peer review. That's not much of a victory, but in this context, you take what you can get.

Referee reports vary in detail and quality, so there is no guarantee that they will contain useful feedback. Sometimes, reviewers criticize your position in ways that are too vague for you to know what they mean or in ways that appear outright inconsistent with what you wrote. In those cases, it is obviously best to disregard the feedback. Other times, reviewers raise important objections or highlight shortcomings in your scholarship. In those cases, it may be worth taking a little time to revise the paper to address their concerns. Whether that is worth doing will depend on how much you agree with the referees' judgments and how big of a problem you think their

---

[50] Do not conform your paper to the journal's preferred style until <u>after</u> the paper has been accepted for publication. Given how common rejections are, doing this earlier in the process usually just wastes your time.

concerns are.[51] Unfortunately, you will not always know whether the problems are as significant as they suggest. What do you do then?

My suggestion is that when you are unsure whether reviewers have uncovered a noteworthy problem, just send the paper out to another venue for review. If your paper gets rejected again and one of the reviewers offers a similar criticism, then that suggests something is amiss with your work. The criticism is not just the idiosyncratic judgment of one reviewer. In those cases, you should fix the problem before submitting to another journal.

Now consider the more favorable situation where you receive a request to revise your paper and resubmit it. How do you handle those referee reports? First, your default attitude should be that the reviewer's judgment is right. There are some exceptions (which I will note shortly), but for the most part, you should try to accommodate all of the reviewers' requests for revisions. Here is the process for doing that:[52]

1. Read through the reviewers' comments and identify every individual unique change that they suggest. Some reviewers will clearly organize their suggested changes (e.g., with a numbered list), but other will not.
2. Create a document and list every single suggested change. If there is overlap between the reviewers' concerns, lump these together in a section labeled "Both Reviewers." For all other suggested changes, sort them into sections labeled by reviewer.
3. Revise the paper according to the reviewers' suggestions. Some changes will be easy (such as citing an extra source or two); some will be challenging (such as addressing a tough objection).
4. In your document that lists all the suggested changes, describe how you changed the paper in accordance with the reviewers' suggestions. It is best to mention the pages where you made the changes so that the editor and reviewers can locate them easily in your resubmitted manuscript.
5. Resubmit your manuscript along with the document that summarizes your changes, and wait for the paper to be reevaluated. If your paper is given another round of revisions, go back to step 1 and repeat the process.
6. If your paper is accepted for publication, be sure to thank the reviewers in the acknowledgements. Typically, acknowledgements are omitted from the initial submission for the purposes of blind review, so when you add them back to the paper, give the

---

[51] If the reviewers discovered a big problem, then the odds are good that future reviewers will also discover it. It is also inconsistent with intellectual integrity to ignore a major problem with your argument. As philosophers, we are in the business of trying to make sound arguments, after all.

[52] Some of the advice in this process overlaps with Marcus Arvan's recommendations from "The art of the revise-and-resubmit." I am also indebted to David Palmer for guiding me through this process in 2012. My first publication in philosophy was a coauthored piece with him, and at one point, we had to revise and resubmit our paper in light of reviewer comments. Many of the strategies suggested in this section were influenced by his methods for handling revise-and-resubmits.

referees their dues. Remember that reviewing is unpaid service work and that it is not always easy to interpret and assess the merits of a paper.

Now this might all sound too simple. What if you disagree with a reviewer's suggestion? Perhaps they interpreted your argument uncharitably and you want to explain this to the editor. That's one option, but here's a better one: make the argument in your paper clearer, and thank the reviewer for drawing your attention to an ambiguity in your language or presentation. If they interpreted it uncharitably, the odds are decent that future readers as well. Generally, you should change content in response to the reviewers' concerns even if you do not fully agree with them.

There are a few cases where you should resist implementing reviewers' suggestions. One is when the reviewers explicitly contradict one another in their suggestions. In those cases, you should implement the change that you think is most reasonable and explain your judgment in the document that summarizes your changes to the manuscript. Another case where it is best to disregard the reviewer's suggestion is when they want you to state something that is clearly false. As one example, I was once told to change my presentation of a philosopher's view because the reviewer claimed it was incorrect. However, I had circulated a draft of the manuscript to that philosopher previously, and they had confirmed that my presentation of their view was correct. In that circumstance, I explained this to the editor and did not make the requested change.

In the rare instances that you do not adhere to a reviewer's suggestion, be gracious to them in your document explains your changes. (You should be cordial in your comments to the reviewers regardless, but it is especially important in this case.) Remember that the reviewers are the ones whose judgments largely determine whether your manuscript gets accepted for publication. You do not want to come across as hostile or unreasonable.

Hopefully, at the end of the revise-and-resubmit process, you will get your paper accepted for publication. However, it is possible to get a rejection following an initial revise-and-resubmit even if you implement the revisions. Usually, this will mean that you were not able to address the reviewers' concerns to their satisfaction. That can be extremely discouraging, but there is little that can be done beyond getting back to the grind and sending your paper off to another journal. Just keep at it until the peer review process shakes out more favorably.

In truth, your experience trying to publish a manuscript could be far worse than merely discouraging. Almost everyone who has published has at least one memorable [journal horror story]. It could involve an absurdly long review time, disparaging comments from a reviewer, puzzling editorial decisions (e.g., rejecting your paper when reviewers recommend a revise-and-resubmit), or some other snafu with the process. Events like these are frustrating, but it is important to press on and not take it personally.

Developing an Idea (Over Many Years)

In favorable scenarios, you will submit a paper to a journal, get a minor revisions verdict sent back to you within a couple months, make those revisions, and get your paper accepted. In this

scenario, you might be looking at less than 6 months between initial submission and acceptance for publication. It rarely goes that smoothly, though.

Usually, a paper will get rejected at least once or twice before you get a revise-and-resubmit. And you might get a request for additional revisions after your resubmission is evaluated. In many cases, you will end up submitting your paper to journals for a year or more. Back in 2016, I [documented the extreme outlier of my own philosophical career](): "[Appraising Objections to Practical Apatheism]()" (coauthored with Jordan Huzarevich) was published in *Philosophia* after a few years of submitting it to journals and enduring rejections. If you ask your older professors, they probably have at least one story like that one. If you stick around in the profession long enough, you can expect to have at least one experience like this.[53] It is a foreseeable result of the high rejection rate of journals and the variance in peer reviewers' assessments.[54]

Given how long you might be submitting a paper to journals, publishing in philosophy can be a test of your tenacity. The rejection that accompanies it can also be good preparation for the job market – another context where rejection is the expected outcome. Above all, it is crucial not get discouraged. Everyone endures rejection verdicts. Such judgments do not indicate anything meaningful about your philosophical abilities or the quality of your work. Stay the course and keep submitting your drafts.

What about Edited Collections?

At this juncture, you might wonder why I have spent so much time focusing on journal articles when a fair number of publications occur in edited collections. There are two main reasons. First, getting a paper into an edited volume often requires you to be known by the editors of the volume. Most edited collections are invited contributions. Second, even in cases where a call for abstracts (or something similar) is circulated, publications in edited volumes often do not have as much value on your CV as a publication in a good peer-reviewed journal.[55] While a publication in an edited collection may well still improve your CV as a whole, a publication in a high-quality journal will improve it to a greater degree. Third, papers in journals enjoy higher visibility and usually get read and cited more often.

---

[53] See, for example, the anecdotes gathered in the comments on [this post on the Philosophers' Cocoon]().

[54] A further reason why it can take years to get a paper published is related to the earlier observation that lots of people submit papers to journals before they are truly ready to start publishing. A side effect of all these journal submissions is that editors have more material to sort through and have a harder time finding available reviewers. This can make the peer review process take longer than it otherwise would.

[55] This is especially true of chapters published in volumes aimed a popular audience, such as those in [The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series](). These publications are usually regarded as more akin to public-facing philosophy than the equivalent of a research-based publication. In that way, they do less to improve your credentials than a typical book chapter would. For some discussion of these specific types of publications, see [this discussion on the Philosophers' Cocoon]().

All that said, if the opportunity arises to submit to an edited collection from a reputable scholarly publisher,[56] go for it. My point is simply that you should not expect to fill up your CV with invited contributions to edited volumes without first demonstrating that you are a serious scholar who can publish quality work in other venues.

What about Discussion Notes?

One relatively rare type of publication in philosophy is the discussion note. These short pieces are usually 2500 words or less and respond directly to an article recently published in the journal. Given the short length of discussion notes and their narrow scope, they can be written much faster than a typical journal article. This is by far the biggest advantage of writing a discussion note. The relative value of a discussion note will depend a lot on the personal judgments of the person reading your CV, but these notes usually do not carry as much weight as a standard journal article.

Unfortunately, discussion notes have two major limitations. First, only a minority of journals accept discussion note submissions. Here are some journals that publish them:

- American Philosophical Quarterly
- Philosophical Quarterly
- Ethics
- Philosophia
- Dialectica
- Analysis
- Res Philsophica
- Thought
- Australasian Journal of Philosophy
- Philosophy and Phenomenological Research
- Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy

The second limitation of discussion notes is that often the journals that publish discussion notes will only publish notes pertaining to articles recently published *in that journal*. Thus, if a discussion note gets rejected, there is often nowhere else to send it. So, even though it does not take as long to write a discussion note as it would take to write a full article, there is a good chance that your time spent writing a discussion note will be wasted. The *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* is a notable exception to this rule: this journal *will* publish discussion notes focusing on articles in other journals.

For the reasons noted above, the best discussion notes to try to publish are those that could be integrated into a larger project if the note was rejected. If this is not possible but you still want to

---

[56] Some suitable publishers include Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, MIT Press, Routledge, Princeton University Press, Harvard University Press, and Springer. There are many others as well.

submit a discussion note, then work swiftly to get it under review, and do not let it distract you from working on other material for long.

What about Public-Facing Philosophy?

When I was a graduate student, the most common view was that public-facing philosophy was not as valuable to one's professional prospects as publishing in journals or edited collections with top presses. That is probably still true, and because this material often has to be streamlined or simplified for a general audience, some do not even regard this material as "real" philosophy. Nonetheless, published work aimed at a general audience can be a net-positive on your CV, mainly when it comes to teaching jobs.[57] But you usually need to have some other publications to complement your public-facing work. Otherwise, this could create the impression that your work is not rigorous enough to withstand the scrutiny of the scholarly community, and so you can only publish superficial material for general audiences. So, if you have the chance to write an op-ed, an article for *The Conversation*, or a chapter for a public-facing edited collection, I will not dissuade you from doing so. But these kinds of publications are not substitutes for publishing journal articles and book chapters.

What about Teaching-Focused Publications?

Journals like *Teaching Philosophy*, *Teaching Ethics*, and *American Association of Philosophy Teachers Studies in Pedagogy* specialize in scholarship related to pedagogy in philosophy.[58] Publications in these venues will almost surely make you more competitive for teaching jobs: they are a clear demonstration of your commitment to developing your teaching abilities and contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Their effect on your competitiveness for research positions is more complicated. By publishing in these journals, you are communicating that teaching is a significant part of your scholarly identity. Some may think this means you are less interested in doing standard research in philosophy, especially if you have few publications outside of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Thus, publishing in these venues can make you less competitive for research jobs.

One thing to note about pedagogy-focused publications is that you will virtually never write a seminar paper that will be focused on this area of scholarship. Thus, working up something to submit to a journal in this area will usually require you to pursue it with minimal input from your professors.

---

[57] During my time on the job market, there were occasionally jobs that listed as experience doing public philosophy as a preferred credential. Deans and other administrators – folks you might talk to on a campus visit – also tend to like faculty who do work that increases the department or university's visibility.

[58] There are also many journals that publish more general work in this area, such as *College Teaching* and *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*.

What about Conference Proceedings?

Sometimes, papers accepted to a conference will be published in a volume after the conference concludes. These conference proceedings can be listed as publications on a CV (so long as they are clearly separated from journal articles and other publication types), but they are not perceived as noteworthy publications by most in the profession.[59] These proceedings usually do not undergo any additional review, so getting into the conference is sufficient for publication in the proceedings.[60] Getting accepted for presentation at a conference is vastly easier than getting a paper accepted for publication in a journal, so this kind of publication does not tend to impress anyone.[61] Thus, conference proceedings usually have little impact on the quality of your CV, so acquiring publications in this manner should not be a priority.[62]

What About Book Reviews?

Thus far, I have focused on almost exclusively on publishing article-length works. But there is one rather common type of publication in philosophy that is even shorter than discussion notes or conference papers: the book review. Book reviews carry almost no value in terms of buffing the "Publications" section of your CV. While they are publications, they are regarded as more akin to professional service than a work of original scholarship.

Nevertheless, there can be good reasons for completing book reviews on occasion. First, you will virtually always get a free copy of the book you are reviewing.[63] Second, reviewing a recent book your area of specialization can give you some insight into future research you might do. Third, since book reviews have deadlines, they can provide incentive to read material that you might have read in the future anyway (e.g., for your dissertation).

All journals that publish book reviews will have their own set of guidelines for how books should be reviewed. Generally, all will ask you to summarize the book's content, assess its pedagogical usefulness, and appraise some of its main arguments. What will vary is how much

---

[59] I actually prefer not to list conference proceedings as "publications" at all and just note them where I list the paper in the "Conference Presentations" section of my CV.

[60] Sometimes, papers presented at a conference are later assimilated into an edited book for a major publisher like Oxford University Press or Routledge. These kinds of publications are more akin to edited collections than conference proceedings because revisions will be expected and the papers will undergo some form of peer or editorial review.

[61] There is at least one well-known exception to this rule: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. Publications in that venue are usually held in high regard.

[62] Sometimes, when you publish a paper in conference proceedings, you will be required to assign copyright to the publishers of those proceedings. That can be a significant problem if you hoped to use that material in paper you would submit to a journal. However, most of the time, your eventual submission to a journal will be a massive expansion and revision of whatever you submitted to the conference. Usually, this makes the work sufficiently "new" to not raise copyright issues with journals, but it can be worth checking with the editors to clarify the journal's policy on the matter.

[63] Some publishers are starting to only offer digital copies for free – a sad outcome for those like myself who prefer hard copies.

each component is emphasized. For instance, a journal like *Teaching Philosophy* would want more content devoted to assessing its instructional usefulness compared to most other journals.

Overall, doing a book review or two as a graduate student is perfectly fine, but completing book reviews is no substitute for publishing articles.[64]

Consistently Producing Publishable Material

After 2 or 3 years of graduate school, you will have developed many papers while completing your graduate coursework. Not all of them will contain publishable ideas, but some will. At this juncture, you should revise those papers with the aim of getting some of them published. Unfortunately, trying to revise all of them while simultaneously developing new material (which you will be doing throughout graduate school) is not a preferable strategy.[65] A better strategy is to balance the development of new ideas with the refinement of old ones. There are many ways to strike this balance, but I favor a method I call the **2/2/2 system**. The goal of the system is to meet 3 conditions:

1. Have 2 papers under review at journals or (if applicable) at other stages of the publication process (e.g., awaiting editor feedback, awaiting proofs).
2. Have 2 papers fully drafted and undergoing revisions.
3. Have 2 paper ideas in development.

Ideally, when a paper finally reaches the end of the publication process, you will be in position to finish revisions on another paper and send it off for review. And shortly thereafter, you can hopefully develop an idea into a working draft, and slot a new idea into development for a future paper. In practice, it will rarely work so cleanly. Papers often get rejected, which means that they stay under review for a long time. Some ideas do not materialize as planned and result in poor drafts that are not publishable. After reviewer comments are received, you may determine that the paper needs more time at the revision stage before you send it back out for review. This is all fine: the important thing is that sending your work to journals for review is a consistent feature of your writing process and that you do not get stuck refining your ideas indefinitely.

One of the most common mistakes graduate students make with regard to publishing material is waiting too long to send their work to journals. Often, this practice is conjoined with concerns that their work is not yet perfected or that they simply are not good enough philosophers to get material published. Striving for perfection in your work is a recipe for never publishing anything

---

[64] Thom Brooks suggests in his "Publishing Advice for Graduate Students" that a book review is the ideal first publication. Beyond the benefits I noted above, he argues that writing a book review provides an easy way for graduate students to develop an authorial voice directed at general members of the profession and that writing a book review gives valuable insights into the publishing process. However, since book reviews do little to increase your competitiveness on the job market, I regard them as entirely optional – time spent working on book reviews may be more valuable if spent refining an article-length paper instead.

[65] No doubt there are some people who can revise a half-dozen papers while writing a half-dozen others from scratch, but even if doing so is possible, I do not consider it desirable or realistic. Such a work schedule is a recipe for burnout.

– even the most influential philosophy papers have problems with them. So you must be willing to send your work out when it is *good enough*, even though it will not be perfect. The 2/2/2 system demands a consistent practice of sending at least 2 papers out for review, so aiming for perfection with one's revisions is generally not compatible with this approach.

While this system does require sending papers out for review with some frequency, some may object that this approach does not involve sending out *enough* papers for review. Some philosophers will advise graduate students to send as many papers as they possibly can to journals for review – even if that is 10 or more.[66] The reasoning behind this approach is that the rejection rates at good journals tend to be near 90%, so if you have 10 papers under review at the same time, the odds are that 9 of them get rejected. Furthermore, review times can be significant (i.e., 6 months or more), and journals require you to refrain from submitting your manuscript elsewhere while it is under review with them. Thus, according to this line of reasoning, graduate students should be submitting as many papers as possible to journals so that they can maximize their chances of getting publications.

I am sympathetic to this perspective, but there are two big caveats to it. First, producing a publishable paper is *hard*. I suspect many graduate students attempting to follow this advice will end up producing poor papers that (as expected) get rejected at many, many journals before being revised enough to get published. That process will often be less efficient than writing a better paper initially that stands a much better chance of getting published.[67] Second, if you take the time to craft an excellent paper and send it to a journal that is a good fit (i.e., in aims and scope), you will almost surely have higher chance of acceptance than 10%. If your strategy is simply to send it to the most prestigious journal possible (in order of perceived prestige), then you are virtually guaranteed to experience a lot of rejection. However, as I noted previously, this should not be your sole strategy for selecting publication venues.

Once you begin sending papers out to journals for review, the pursuit of publication should be one of your central objectives and a consistent feature of your work routine. As discussed earlier, most graduate students will only have about a 2- or 3-year window to publish material before going on the job market. Thus, after the completion of your second year in the PhD program,

---

[66] A less extreme version of this position is presented by Perry Hendricks in his "A Publishing Guide for Graduate Students." Hendricks recommends having at least 4 papers under review at all times. That is surely more than necessary, and trying to meet this standard may result in sending out papers that are not yet of publishable quality. Hendricks' later recommendation that graduate students move from having a paper *idea* to submitting a full paper to a journal in *only two weeks* reinforces this concern – that is a far faster drafting process than most will be able to manage. Hendricks was quite successful at publishing as a graduate student, but I doubt his approach is optimal or practical for most graduate students.

[67] While there is some arbitrariness in peer reviewers' judgments of a paper's quality, it is not just a crapshoot at credible journals: unclear, inadequately researched, or weakly argued papers are more likely to get rejected. Thus, rushing to send out half-baked ideas to journals is not the optimal strategy for getting the maximal number of publications.

prioritize publishing. It should stay near the top of your priority list at least until you have secured permanent employment and usually until you have tenure (or the equivalent).[68]

Other Resources

There are many guides to writing publishable philosophy. What I have offered in this section draws on a few existing ones and what I have gleaned from my own experiences and conversations with other philosophers, but how philosophers approach identifying and creating publishable work varies dramatically. For alternative perspectives, I encourage readers to consult some of the following resources on this topic:

- Thomas Brooks, "Publishing Advice for Graduate Students"
- Michael Huemer, "Publishing in Philosophy"
- Neil McKinnon, "Publishing Your Philosophy"
- Jason Brennan, "Productive in Publishing"
- David Enoch, "Productive in Publishing 2: Reply to Brennan"
- John Danaher, "Advice on Publishing Peer Review Articles"
- Eric Schwitzgebel, "How to Publish a Journal Article in Philosophy: Advice for Graduate Students and New Assistant Professors"
- Marcus Arvan, "Publishing Advice for Early Career People: A Different Perspective"
- Daniel Muñoz, "Writing Philosophy for Publication"

All authors above have published a significant amount of high-quality philosophy. The variety in their approaches and points of emphasis showcases that many different methods can work. I encourage you to adopt the methods or strategies that work best for you, even if it deviates from the general advice I have offered in this part of the guide.

---

[68] A tenure-track job at a community college might be an exception. These jobs often do not carry expectations that you will be an active researcher, and research may not play any role in evaluating your application for tenure. Most jobs, even those with heavy teaching loads, usually require some published research for tenure, however.

Part 7: Academic Conferences

One of the standard things that philosophers do is attend academic conferences and share their research. If you produce a high-quality seminar paper, a professor might suggest that you submit it to a conference. You might also just be interesting in submitting to one out of curiosity: what's it like when hundreds of philosophers gather together in the same place? Or maybe you want to meet some philosophers outside your university or want to list a few conference presentations on your CV. Whatever the case, this part focuses on what conferences are like, why you should go to them, and how to get your existing work accepted to them. Before going further, however, let's talk a little about money.

Funding

As a graduate student, you will have a procedure for getting reimbursed for travel expenses each year. Usually, this will involve filling out a form documenting your travel and submitting it within a specific timeframe to one of your department's administrative staff, but the specifics will vary depending on your university. Before you apply to any conferences, check with your department about these procedures, and make sure that you understand them. Also check to see if there are travel funds available from sources outside your department and how you might apply for those funds.

Remember the **Travel Rule**. If you are eligible to be reimbursed for travel expenses, then apply for reimbursement. Even domestic conferences that last two days can require more than $1000 depending on where they are located and what the lodging arrangements are. In some cases, you will need to submit travel authorization requests before you even know whether your submission has been accepted to the conference because of oddities with these deadlines and procedures. It's annoying, but just do it: don't miss out on travel funding because you neglected to apply for reimbursement or did not document the details of your travel.

When you attend events, also be sure to save copies of all your receipts. In particular, save receipts for flights, ground transportation, parking, hotel reservations, and conference registration fees. You can often get reimbursed for the full cost of these items, and they can each be fairly expensive. Meals are often reimbursed at a fixed per diem rate, so saving receipts for meals is not as important. Be sure to also save the email noting your acceptance to the event and a copy of the conference program, even if you already provided these documents to get authorized for travel in the first place: you may need to present these materials as part of your reimbursement request when you return.

Conference Format

If you have never been to an academic conference, you may wonder what they are like. Most philosophy conferences are in-person events hosted at a university or a large hotel. Presentations take place in classrooms or meeting rooms. The speaker will spend 20–30 minutes presenting an

argument drawn from the material they submitted to the conference (whether it was a full paper or an abstract). At some conferences, a commentator will then follow with some critical remarks (lasting about 10 minutes), and the presenter will offer a brief response (of about 5 minutes). Someone serving the role of session chair will monitor speaking time and introduce the presenter(s) and commentator as needed. Once these folks have finished presenting their prepared material, audience members will have the chance to ask questions and raise objections. The session chair usually calls on audience members and keeps track of the question queue.[69] At some events, there will be no formal commentators, and the main presentation will be immediately followed by questions from the audience.

The format of conference presentations at virtual events tends to be similar with one obvious difference: the presenter, commentator, audience members, and chair are all using a video conferencing platform like Zoom. Presenters may also share additional materials at these events through attachments in the chat, and audience members might post brief questions there as well. This can be handy for audience members who are so far back in the queue that they may not get to ask their question before the session ends.

Both virtual and in-person conferences usually have designated breaks where participants are expected to get meals. However, at in-person events, what occurs in these windows (especially in the evenings) is arguably more significant than what happens during the formal presentations. It is this time in between sessions or during dinners where you can socialize with colleagues, meet new people, and have informal discussions about topics of mutual interest. Virtual conferences have some advantages over in-person conferences – they are cheaper and easier for most to attend, they are usually cheaper and easier for hosts to run, and they have a lower environmental impact – but they usually lack the vibrant social dynamic that can make in-person conferences worthwhile. In-person conferences can also be a better experience for those who do not find Zoom presentations immersive or engaging.

The Value of Academic Conferences

Conferences involve significant costs: they are stressful, they can cost a significant amount of money (though you will hopefully get much of it reimbursed), and they are a considerable time commitment.[70] Fortunately, presenting at a conference also confers several benefits:

1. You will receive useful feedback on some of your current work, usually from both an official commentator and an audience.
2. You will learn about others' works in progress and perhaps gain insight into some of the current debates in your areas of interest.

---

[69] Graduate students can sometimes serve as session chairs. While this short description does encapsulate their primary duties accurately, a more detailed description of their responsibilities can be found in the American Philosophical Association's "Guide for Meeting Participants" on pages 9–10.

[70] In-person conferences are also not ecologically friendly, given the amount of travel they usually involve, so there is also an environmental cost to consider.

3. You will gain experience presenting your ideas to an audience – an important skill to develop since you will probably need to do this well if you are a finalist for a permanent academic position.
4. You will meet other people who work in your field and have an opportunity to talk with them about your work and other shared professional interests.
5. Conference submissions have firm deadlines that generate an incentive to write and revise. In this manner, planning to submit to a conference serves as a natural anti-procrastination aid.

While these benefits can be significant, some view conferences in a more pessimistic light. One of the most amusing critiques of conferences in Christy Wampole's "The Conference Manifesto."[71] She highlights a number of undesirable conference experiences such as trying to understand a speaker's "academese" or sitting through an extremely boring presentation and wonders whether it is worth continuing to have in-person conferences in their standard form. It is certainly fair to mention that some conference presentations are poor and that conference experiences can be bad overall.[72] Nevertheless, for most graduate students, periodically attending conferences will be worth it – not just as a way to refine one's philosophical abilities and gain feedback on work in progress but also as a chance to interact with philosophers outside one's graduate institution.

It is worth noting, however, that all conferences are not of equal quality or prestige. In North America, the divisional meetings of the American Philosophical Association (APA) tend to be the largest, most varied in content, and most prestigious. If you attend an APA conference, it is a guarantee that you will be able to find many presentations on topics in your areas of interest because there are so many concurrent sessions and meetings of special interest groups. Many smaller conferences, such as graduate student conferences or meetings of a state's philosophical association, will not have as much variety in the presentations you are able to attend. However, smaller conferences may also have a much smaller number of submissions, and thus, it may be easier for you to get a paper accepted to them. It can also make sense to submit to conferences nearer your graduate institution since traveling to them may be cheaper and less onerous. Some philosophers also prefer smaller conferences because they feel more personal, and it is easier to interact with all the other conference attendees.

How Do I Find Conferences to Submit to?

One of the more old-school methods for learning about conferences is to ask your professors about conferences in nearby cities and about the notable national meetings that they would recommend attending. If you subscribe to certain listservs, you might also see a Call for Papers

---

[71] See also "The Value of Conferences" on Daily Nous and the comments.

[72] For one example of a very bad conference experience, see my "Best and Worst Conference Experiences."

(CFP) for a conference circulated from time to time. However, there is a far simpler and faster method for locating philosophy events near you: https://philevents.org/

Even without an account, you can search this site for upcoming events and CFPs that are relevant to you. I recommend making an account on this site – you may have already done so via PhilPapers or PhilPeople, and one account carries over to all of them – and then signing up for weekly email synopses of new events posted that meet your preferences (regarding location, topic, etc.). When you find a conference that you want to submit to, make a note of the deadline and submission instructions. Then you just need to develop a paper to submit to the event.

Conference Papers and Commentaries

There are two types of submissions that you might send to the organizing committee of a conference to review: a paper and an extended abstract. Let's consider each of these in turn. The we will discuss the conference commentary

Writing a Conference Paper

Conference papers tend to be shorter than the papers you will submit to journals. Most conferences seek papers between 2500 and 4000 words.[73] In papers of this length, you usually only have the space to present a single argument and perhaps respond to a couple objections. Do not worry about trying to squeeze every major objection into the body of your paper.[74] If you are adapting a seminar paper to submit to a conference, you will need to isolate the core argument and trim it down to its rawest essence. This may require relegating explanations of certain assumptions to footnotes and condensing your responses to objections. Your introduction should also be very short – probably just one or two paragraphs. The key is to make sure that your argument remains coherent and cohesive despite losing some of its background context.

Writing a conference paper from scratch is more work than trimming down an existing draft, but it is not nearly as much work as writing an article-length paper. In addition to being shorter, conference papers are not expected to be as polished or as carefully situated in the literature as longer papers. For a conference paper, just focus on developing your main argument and presenting it as clearly as you can. See how much space that requires, and then add your treatment of objections. Leave at least 400 words to add a succinct introduction and a quick concluding section.

Regardless of how you produce your conference paper, save a few days to do thorough revisions. Conference papers do not need to be immaculate to be accepted, but many conferences still reject a fair portion of their submissions. Letting your paper sit for a day or two and then reading through it with fresh eyes may help you catch a big mistake or an area where your trimming removed content essential for comprehension. Moreover, if your paper will have a commentator,

---

[73] The APA divisional meetings have an upper limit of 3000 words on most submissions, for instance.

[74] You should still keep such objections in mind: you are likely to be asked about them during Q&A.

a more polished submission usually results in better comments. Some conferences even offer awards for the best paper submitted (usually selected by the conference organizers). So, even though it is just a conference paper, don't neglect your revisions.

<u>Writing an Extended Abstract</u>

An extended abstract is usually 500–1000 words. That is not a lot of space, but one advantage of that limitation is that you can write an extended abstract in a single workday. The process should only take a few hours even if you are starting from scratch. That assumes, of course, that you have a suitable idea for a presentation. Do not worry about summarizing much literature in an extended abstract. They usually have only a few references (if any). Your introductory remarks should be limited to just a sentence or two. Follow those remarks with your thesis statement, and then immediately transition to explaining your main argument. The point of an extended abstract is to provide an outline of what you would present if your submission were accepted, so do not worry too much if you feel your explanation is superficial or glosses over key disputes and assumptions. Those who evaluate your submissions know this abstract does not exhaust your thoughts on the subject.

Almost all the words in your extended abstract should be devoted to making your central argument as clear and cogent as possible. Nevertheless, it is a good idea to mention objections and gesture at replies. Keep your explanations of objections to only a sentence or two, and do the same with your replies. A concluding thought may be nice to include at the end if there is space, but doing so is certainly optional for this kind of submission.

As with conference papers, I recommend leaving some time to reread your extended abstract and make revisions where needed. Since these manuscripts are so short, you can revise them multiple times in only an hour.

If your extended abstract is accepted to the conference, you will sometimes be expected to produce a full-length paper (perhaps to submit to a commentator). In that scenario, you can refer to the prior subsection for some pointers on developing a conference paper. However, in many cases, you will <u>not</u> be required to submit a full paper. This makes conferences that only require abstracts the ideal venues for workshopping nascent ideas and arguments that you have not yet developed into full-fledged papers.

<u>Writing a Conference Commentary</u>

A conference commentary is a short critical response to a paper that was accepted for presentation at the event. Typically, commentators are volunteers. At some events (such as APA meetings), an official call for commentators is solicited, and people can submit a short application expressing their interest and listing their AOSs. As conference submissions are accepted, organizers match the volunteers with papers in their areas of expertise. In other cases, commentators might be selected internally: they might be graduate students or faculty at the host institution, for instance. Some conferences will also offer authors of rejected submissions the

chance to provide commentaries at the event. It is not much work to draft a commentary, and providing a commentary is usually sufficient to get your university to reimburse your conference expenses. Thus, serving as a commentator is a good way to participate in the event and get your costs covered while doing a relatively modest amount of work.

The primary objectives of a commentary are (1) provide valuable feedback to the author of the submission with the aim of improving the paper and (2) help facilitate the discussion that follows the presentation. Your written remarks to the presenter will typically be 1000–1500 words, and your speaking time will usually have an upper limit of 10 minutes. Given the short length of your comments, they should be limited to making just one or two substantive points. Do not bombard the presenter with a plethora of poorly explained objections. Additionally, do not devote time in your commentary to presenting your own view on the topic: your conference commentary on another person's paper is not the appropriate venue for developing your own positive views, and that material is unlikely to help the presenter refine their work.

Your goal is <u>not</u> to show that the presenter's thesis is false. Your critical remarks should be made in the spirit of helping the presenter improve the paper. Moreover, your remarks do not have to all be critical: it is perfectly fine to highlight something good about the presenter's argument or even to explore a way in which you think their argument could be strengthened. You can also make connections to literature that the presenter did not engage or explore the implications of the argument if it turns out to be sound.

When you finish drafting your comments, send them to the presenter. Standard practice is to send them to the presenter <u>at least 1 week in advance of the conference</u>. If you are not able to meet that standard, at least notify the presenter that you are working on it and let them know when you will have it completed. Conference papers are short, which means they do not take long to read, and your written comments only need to be around 1000 words. Thus, even in a pinch, you should be able to produce a draft of your comments in one or two workdays.

Once you have sent your comments to the presenter, do not change them. The presenter is supposed to reply directly to your comments, so changing them would force the presenter to develop a response immediately on presentation day. Many philosophers can handle that, but putting them in this position is inconsiderate. If you catch a major mistake in your commentary after you have passed it along to the presenter, email them and explain what you would like to say instead. If the presenter is fine with your change, then go ahead and alter what you have said; otherwise, just leave it alone. There may be an opportunity to clarify things in the Q&A.

Presenting at Conferences

It is still common in many venues for philosophers to simply read their papers.[75] If you are providing a short commentary on someone else's paper, reading your comments aloud – with

---

[75] My impression is that it is becoming more common for philosophers to use visual aids with their presentations – probably because early career philosophers tend to be more tech-savvy – but it is not a ubiquitous practice.

perhaps a few short expansions on your written remarks – is appropriate. The presenter is tasked with responding directly to your written comments and will have made preparations accordingly. Thus, deviating from them would be unprofessional and could put the presenter in a difficult position. However, <u>if you are the primary presenter during the session, do not just read the paper</u>. You may elect to read some important portions of your paper, but rehearse your presentation enough that you can summarize some of the core ideas without just reading them verbatim. Additionally, provide a visual aid to the audience, whether it be a handout, PowerPoint, or something else entirely. This will make it easier for the audience to understand your main ideas and help keep them engaged.

This advice may strike some readers as surprising since it is still so normal to attend presentations where people just read their papers. However, the commonness of the practice does not justify it. First, for a conference presentation of 20–30 minutes, many members of the audience will not be able to maintain the intense auditory focus required to process all that information. Second, because fewer people will clearly understand your position and argument, a greater portion of the Q&A will be occupied with clarification questions or questions that proceed from a misunderstanding of your position. That means that you will get less useful feedback from the discussion. Third, conference presentations are a good opportunity for you to develop the oral communication skills you will need in job interviews and job talks. Reading your paper will not help you develop those skills. Fourth, giving a high-quality presentation is one way to make a positive impression on people you meet. Reading your paper will not make a noteworthy impression on members of your audience.

Preferences vary regarding visual aids. Some like the superior polish and flow of a well-designed PowerPoint.[76] Others prefer a paper handout that they can easily reference as the presentation proceeds – this allows people to refer back to earlier ideas without requesting you to backtrack through your slides. I have generally gotten better questions in presentations where I have used short handouts (2 pages max) rather than PowerPoints, but as <u>discussions of this subject</u> demonstrate, your experience might be different. My recommendation is to experiment with different formats of visual aids and identify the one that best suits your presentation style.

During your rehearsals of the presentation, be mindful of the time constraints. Every minute you go beyond the time limit takes away time from the time the audience will have to ask you questions. Thus, you want to be sure you stay within the time you are allotted.

If your presentation is followed by a commentary, begin your response to the commentator by thanking them for their feedback. Then offer a very brief response to their key ideas. You should have received the commentary in advance of the conference, so you should already know what you are going to say. Typically, you have 5 minutes to respond to comments. Absolutely do not exceed that time limit. Respond in just 3 or 4 minutes if you can. By that point, audience members may be getting restless since they have already been listening to others talk for more

---

[76] Some tips for designing PowerPoints can be found in the <u>Preparing for Class</u> subsection of <u>Part 10</u>.

than 30 minutes. If you want to discuss the topic in more detail with your commentator, make arrangements to do so outside of the formal presentation – perhaps over lunch on a different day or during free time that follows the session.

All of these guidelines apply if you are presenting at a virtual conference, but you will also need to test your technology before your presentation – ideally, before even logging onto the conference platform for the first time. Make sure your background is neither too dim nor too bright, test the volume on your microphone so that you will be audible to your audience, and have a backup microphone and webcam available in case something goes wrong. Last but not least, when you speak, try to look at the webcam and not at your computer monitor to simulate eye contact with the audience.[77]

Poster Presentations

Poster presentations are not a common feature of philosophy conferences, but they have become a mainstay at a few large conferences.[78] Poster session proposals usually take the format of extended abstracts.[79] You may also be offered a chance to give a poster presentation if your submission to the main program is rejected.

If you are selected for a poster presentation, you will prepare a poster about your topic, display it in a designated area, and be present near your poster at a specified time during the conference. The conference organizers should tell you what the recommended dimensions of the poster are and any other style guidelines they want followed. You will then need to design a poster and arrange to have it printed.[80] Your university should offer printing services through your library, bookstore, or communications department.

It can be difficult to design a poster that is visually striking with some philosophical topics, but you should avoid having a poster that is just a massive wall of text. Use clear headings and subheadings. Outline the premises and conclusion of your argument. Insert a suitable table or graph to present some of your information (if you can). Most of all, make sure the font is big enough that people can read it when standing several feet away. You can also design a short handout to compliment your poster and provide this extra material to attendees, though this is not required.

When you are near your poster at the appropriate time during the conference, attendees will navigate the room looking at the posters on display. People will occasionally ask you about your poster and your arguments. Poster presentations are less formal than other presentation types,

---

[77] Looking at the monitor is a tough habit to break, but getting an external webcam that slides over the top of your monitor can help. If you look at the upper portion of your monitor, you may appear (to your audience) to be looking at the camera even if you are not actually doing so.

[78] The divisional meetings of the APA and the Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress are the most prominent examples.

[79] For example, the word limit for poster session proposals at an APA meeting is 750 words.

[80] While it is technically optional, I strongly recommend laminating your poster to protect it from damage. Laminated posters also just look glossier and more polished than unlaminated ones.

and for the most part, attendees will be easygoing with their inquiries. Since a lot of people may pass by your poster, these presentations often provide good opportunities to meet new people.[81]

What Do You Wear at Conferences?

In most cases, I advise dressing business casual for conferences. This is formal enough to be appropriate when you are presenting but not so formal that you come across as a graduate student who is trying too hard to be taken seriously. However, dressing somewhat less formally can be fine in the right context. If it is a summer conference where you will sometimes be outdoors (e.g., walking to lunch), then wearing shorts is probably fine. As you attend conferences, you will learn what the dress code norms are for some of the annual events. If you are not sure what is appropriate, the best strategy is to ask the conference organizers or people who have attended the event in the past.

I believe these same standards apply to virtual conferences. Even though you may only be visible from the chest up on your webcam, dressing the part of the conference participant helps to put you in the right mindset for the event. It also eliminates the possibility of your informal attire being exposed if you have to move unexpectedly and neglect to disable your camera.

Conduct

The foremost rule of conference conduct is that you respect other attendees. In this manner, your conduct is hopefully no different than how you would normally treat people. When you ask people questions about their work, do not insult them or make unflattering insinuations about their area of research. When people ask you questions or provide useful comments, thank them for their feedback.

When you are asking questions in a session, follow the existing queue. Make sure you have a clear question in mind before you place yourself in the queue. Some questions are disjointed, incoherent, or based on an uncharitable interpretation of the author's presentation. You do not want to ask those sorts of questions. Also make sure that you can ask your question quickly: time in these sessions is limited, so long questions risk preventing people late in the queue from getting to ask their questions.

Do not be shy about approaching people you do not know to ask them questions about their work or even just to provide a remark about something of theirs you have read. You may be more or less charismatic than other philosophers, but I encourage even the more thoroughgoing introverts (like myself) to make an effort to meet some new people at every event you attend. If you stay in the profession for a while, the odds are very good that you will run into those people again at another conference in the future – making new friends in the present will make future events more enjoyable.

---

[81] For further information on poster sessions, consult the APA's "Poster Session Information."

Now, despite what I just said, you should not feel obligated to attend every session or every social event. Most big conferences have presentations running all day – sometimes including late night sessions or receptions and early morning breakfasts. If you tried to attend everything, you would be run ragged within 36 hours and probably not have a good time. It is perfectly fine to take time to yourself if you are socially drained or otherwise exhausted.[82] My broader point is simply that you are not taking full advantage of the conference environment if you are mostly invisible outside of your assigned presentation time.

The good practices for asking questions during in-person conferences also apply to virtual conferences with one additional rule: keep your microphone muted when you are not speaking. This prevents unexpected noise from distracting presenters or audience members.

On the whole, virtual events are much less taxing than in-person conferences: social events are usually a minimal component of them, there is no hotel to check into, and if you need to get a meal, you can just go to your kitchen. Nonetheless, you should feel fine about skipping some of the sessions at a virtual conference. Zoom fatigue is a legitimate concern at these events, and many attendees at virtual events are fitting that conference into their normal work weeks. Thus, no one is going to reprimand you being absent for portions of the event. You might also take a partial break by turning off your camera and minimizing the app displaying the conference presentations. This way, you can still listen to the audio of the presentation but do not need to look at the computer screen.

What If I Can't Attend Many Conferences?

Depending on your geographic location and available funding, it may be difficult for you to attend in-person events. Graduate students often have rather limited travel funds, and if a conference is too far away for driving to be a viable option, then you will have to cope with the costs of an airline ticket. The good news, however, is that you do not need to attend a ton of conferences – they do not have a huge impact on your viability on the academic job market. While conferences can aid your professionalization by providing a means for you to get feedback on your work and by helping you develop your presentation skills, the actual line on the CV associated with the conference presentation will carry little weight on its own.

Typically, even in programs where travel funding is meager, you can get enough travel funds to attend one conference each year. Remember to explore all your options for reimbursement, including those outside your department.[83] You may also consider coordinating with faculty or other graduate students to see if anyone else is interested in submitting to the same conferences. If several of you are accepted, you may be able to split hotel room costs and other travel expenses.

---

[82] Conference goers may be tired for many reasons beyond just attending a bunch of presentations: jet lag, late night travel, last minute presentation prep, and so on.

[83] For APA meetings, graduate students can apply for travel stipends to supplement the funds from their institution. Other conferences sometimes offer similar financial support, though it is rare.

Another option is to submit to virtual conferences or hybrid conferences. (Hybrid conferences have a combination of in-person and virtual attendees.) The cost of attending an event virtually is usually nothing; if there are any expenses, they will usually be limited to a registration fee.

Part 8: Developing a Professional Presence

If you are pursuing an academic career, then you will want to develop a presence in the philosophy profession before you go on the job market. This means that a nontrivial number of people in the profession should know who you are and what you do. Having a little name recognition will not only help distinguish you from others in the massive pile of job applicants but can also create new opportunities for you to build your CV (e.g., invited talks, invited contributions to edited volumes). This section provides an overview of how you can become a little better known in the profession.

Meeting People

Perhaps the most straightforward way to develop a professional presence is through your direct interactions with others. Some of this will happen naturally as you progress through your program and develop relationships with the professors at your own institution. They will mention you to others that they know, and slowly some people outside your department will get an idea of who you are.

Occasionally, a distinguished speaker will visit your department as a guest speaker. Generally, you should attend these talks, even when the topic is outside your main areas of interest. If there's a department lunch or dinner with the speaker, see if it's possible for you to attend. (Sometimes there won't be space for graduate students, but it cannot hurt to ask.) These meals are great opportunities to ask the visitors questions that go beyond the subject of their talk, and you may learn something noteworthy from their perspective, their area of research, graduate school, or the profession more generally. If you have the chance to chat with a visiting speaker, take advantage of it and be engaged in the conversation, especially if you are asked about your own research. They may remember you when they return to their home institution and may mention you to their colleagues at some point.

As discussed in Part 7, you can also be proactive about meeting other philosophers by going to conferences and engaging with other people at these events. Attend sessions that catch your interest, ask worthwhile questions in the Q&A, strike up conversations at the banquets, present your own material well, and be respectful to others in all your interactions. Being actively engaged at a conference does not mean that you must be in a constant state of socializing, though. In fact, constantly trying to force yourself into conversations can create a *bad* impression by making you seem like a nagging grad student instead of a professional philosopher. If you are heavily introverted, socialize *some* but also allow yourself time to retreat from the crowd and recharge now and then.

Sometimes, even when you see someone in person, you will not have much of a chance to interact with them face-to-face, but you might have something significant that you want to discuss or a question you would like to ask. In those situations, your best bet is to look up their institutional email address and send them a well-composed message after their visit concludes.

You can begin by referencing their campus visit or the conference presentation they gave, mention that you were in the audience, and then raise your question.[84] This may not leave as strong an impression as meeting them in person, but it can certainly still be worth doing. If you've got something worthwhile to say to them, then take a few minutes to type something up.

Another way to meet people of interest (and make yourself known to them) is to get involved with one of the many organizations in the profession. Memberships in most professional philosophy organizations are free or heavily discounted for graduate students. Attending organizational meetings or taking on modest leadership roles (e.g., secretary, assistant website editor) in these organizations can be a way to connect with scholars who share mutual interests. Of course, graduate students will rarely be able to obtain leadership roles in these organizations, so I would not rely on this strategy as your primary way to build connections with other members of the profession. Nevertheless, if you want to get involved with one of the many professional organizations or associations, consult this list provided by Dustin Sigsbee.

Social Media and the Blogosphere

Social media and blogosphere participation provide means for early career scholars to increase their visibility to other philosophers, but their use also comes with significant risks. Having inflammatory or unprofessional content associated with your social media accounts could affect your job prospects. A 2017 CareerBuilder study found that 70% of employers use social media to screen applicants. While this study was not focused on academic philosophy, there is little reason to think that members of search committees will not occasionally search for their applicants' social media profiles and blogs at some point.

Intriguingly, however, the same study reports that 57% of employers are less likely to interview a candidate if they cannot find them online. We can expect that some members of search committees will have similar impressions: if they put an applicant's name into Google and cannot find them anywhere, then they may wonder whether that person has done any substantial work or had any meaningful impact on the profession. This information suggests that if you seek academic employment, you need to have an online presence of some sort, but it does not need to be connected to social media. It can be beneficial to have a professional presence on social media because it provides an additional way to make connections with other philosophers and promote your work, but these things can be done in other ways (e.g., attending conferences, emailing colleagues with inquiries about their current work, publishing in venues with high visibility). However, even if you opt not to be involved with other philosophers on social media, I advise staying in touch with trends in the profession and your subfields by subscribing to relevant blog

---

[84] Since well-known academics are often quite busy, try to keep these emails brief. Don't prattle on for 500 words about who you are or why you like the person's work. Give the context in a couple sentences and then get to your main point. A complimentary line about how you found their work intriguing is fine, but don't overdo it on flattery: remember that you do not want to look like a sycophantic graduate student; you're a professional philosopher asking another professional about their work.

feeds and occasionally consulting other online resources.[85] A lot of information about the profession is communicated online, and you are doing yourself a disservice if you distance yourself from *all* these sources of information.

If you do opt to participate more fully on social media, be mindful of how you interact with others and what you post publicly. It seems to be rather easy – especially on X / Twitter – for academics to post things that come across as arrogant, foolish, immoral, insensitive, ignorant, or some combination of these things. For obvious reasons, you want to avoid doing this, so exercising discretion is critical. Quill Kukla, writing as Rebecca Kukla, offers a very [helpful list of rules and recommendations for conducting oneself on social media](#). You can consult the original post for detailed explanations, but here is the list:

1. Do not talk about how you are struggling to get your work done.
2. Do not complain about the job market.
3. Do not post specifics about job interviews.
4. Do not complain about journal rejections or specific reviewer comments.
5. Do not post about trivial or mundane accomplishments.
6. (Generally) avoid personal posts about banal things in your life.
7. Consider forming a separate page for family and non-academic friends.
8. Proofread.
9. Do your background research before making a statement in an ongoing debate.
10. Do not criticize entire styles or areas of philosophy.
11. Be mindful of who you are responding to.
12. (When possible) boost other people rather than cutting them down.
13. Be willing to concede a point when you are wrong or abandon a thread when it has become unproductive.
14. Do not demand intellectual labor or engagement from marginalized or junior members of the profession.
15. Curate your Facebook circle: do not accept friend requests from absolutely everyone.
16. Allow yourself to post about things that really matter to you: do not compromise your integrity to maintain a perfect public image.
17. Remember that anything you post can be shared.

While I agree with the spirit of these guidelines, I will note one major disagreement between Quill and myself. Before providing these guidelines, Quill suggests that people in the profession can be harmed (professionally) by being inactive on social media. Norms in each subfield differ, but I am very skeptical of this claim. Of course, it is *possible* that non-participation on social media will lead one to forego certain professional opportunities, but there are other ways to pursue those professional opportunities. Calls for papers are usually posted in many places, you

---

[85] Blogs where important professional issues are frequently discussed include (among others) [Daily Nous](#), [Leiter Reports](#), [The Philosophers' Cocoon](#), and [The Blog of the APA](#). I advise graduate students to subscribe to at least a couple of these blogs to keep up with happenings in the profession.

can meet other people by interacting with guest speakers in your department and attending conferences, and you can always contact people whose work interests you via email rather than through social media. Moreover, time spent on social media is time that is *not* spent on writing papers, reading philosophy, designing syllabi, attending pedagogical workshops, and so on. The bottom line is that there are a lot of other activities you could be doing with that time that would be more impactful on your long-term professional development than being active on social media. Finally, it is worth acknowledging that a lot of people fail to properly regulate their conduct on social media, and even when genuine attempts to do so are made, it is very easy to offend or otherwise draw the ire of the folks on social media who are the most hostile and confrontational. In this respect, it is very easy for people's activity on social media to do their careers more harm than good.

With all that in mind, social media participation can have a positive effect if it is done carefully and intelligently. In my own experience, I had a few job interviews where the interviewers were not familiar with my philosophical work but knew who I was from blog posts I had written on the Philosophers' Cocoon in the past. Of course, it is hard to quantify how much this kind of recognition matters in the grand scheme of things.[86] Overall, I think participation on social media in philosophy is optional, but if you are inclined to engage in it, be sure your communication on those platforms is thoughtful and respectful.[87]

Managing Your Online Footprint

Have you ever put your full name into Google and looked at the results? If you have never done that, take a moment to open a blank browser tab and do so. Under ideal circumstances, the top search result will be something related to your philosophical work (e.g., the homepage of your personal website). Of course, if you have a common name or a name shared with a celebrity, that will never happen. In such a scenario, type your full name followed by the word "philosophy" and see what the search engine produces.

This exercise might seem pointless, but it isn't. If you attract someone's attention at a conference, for instance, one of the first things they are likely to do is pop your name into a search engine and try to learn more about you and your work. If you apply for a job and survive the first cut, search committee members may do the same thing. You want people interested in you and your work to be able to find it, and that is why you should manage your online footprint.

The simplest way to boost the visibility in search engine results is to make a personal website that provides descriptions of your research and teaching. If you have publications, include links to them on the page related to your research. If you are teaching your own courses, include recent syllabi and student evaluations. Uploading a current CV is also a good idea. This website

---

[86] I was offered the job in one of these cases, but I suspect other factors played a much larger role in the decision than the merits of any blog post I wrote.

[87] For further discussion about whether junior philosophers should use social media, see this blog post and the many comments.

does not need to be elaborate: a simple Google or WordPress site with 3–5 distinct webpages can be sufficient.[88] To reiterate, the goal of making this website is to make it easier for people to access your work and learn more about you. Accomplishing this goal does not require investing dozens of hours into web design or giving the site monthly updates. Just make sure the site looks professional and that you keep update the content when there is new material worth adding (such as a new publication).[89]

Another strategy for boosting the online visibility of your work is to create accounts on PhilPapers, Academia, ResearchGate, LinkedIn, or some combination of these platforms and then upload your work to these venues. Having a PhilPapers account is most important: not only is this site tailored to philosophers (unlike the others I listed), but papers you write in journals and edited volumes will auto-post to the site whether you have an account or not. Having an account gives you a means of editing the abstracts of these entries, uploading pre-print drafts (if you wish), and editing the keywords and other descriptive information. If you do not monitor this information, then errors in these entries may go undetected for a long time and make it more difficult for people to find your work in searches. Making accounts on the other sites I mentioned is optional but could be beneficial.

Now you might be wondering whether you really need to do all this. If you are not tech-savvy, it may sound like tedious extra work. While I do not think you need to do all the possible things I have mentioned here, I strongly advise you to do some of them. One reason to do so is because it may help you on the job market. Otherwise, you have little control over what I search committee member will find when they start trying to find you on the internet. Another reason is that doing these things makes your work more accessible. If you value your scholarship, you should want people to read it. Hence, you should want to make it easier for people to find and view. Managing your online presence should not be one of your highest priorities, but it should also not be something you entirely neglect.

---

[88] Websites made on these platforms tend to look similar to one another, which is a disadvantage of using them. If you learn some basic web design skills and are willing to pay a small sum of money, you can make sites that are more dynamic and aesthetically appealing. However, most philosophers' websites are not too flashy or elaborate, so you do not need to expend this effort or money if it is not important to you.

[89] Having a professional appearance does not mean that you cannot include, say, a picture of your family, but the content of your site should be notable primarily for its philosophical content – not for other material. For a discussion of whether personal websites should be "purely professional," see this post on the Philosophers' Cocoon.

Part 9: The Dissertation

The doctoral dissertation is the last and most challenging obstacle to obtaining your PhD. It is the most common stumbling block for graduate students: most graduate students who do not obtain their PhD are ABD students that make it to the final lap of the race but never get across the finish line. I state this at the outset so that you will understand one thing: **writing the dissertation is hard**. While there are people who cruise through the dissertation without any notable problems, that experience is quite out of the ordinary. Even if you made it to the ABD phase without any trouble, do not expect writing the dissertation to go smoothly.

I will begin with an overview of why the dissertation stage is different from the rest of graduate school and how this presents unique challenges. Afterward, I will delve into various strategies for completing the dissertation.

A Different Kind of Project[90]

There are four key differences between dissertation work and the rest of graduate school. The first is that <u>the dissertation stage lacks rigid structure and concrete deadlines</u>. The first few years of graduate school are highly structured. You take courses with clear reading lists and concrete deadlines. You have conversations about the course material every week, and the professor sometimes provides insight into the kinds of topics that would make for good papers. Often, you'll get some feedback on in-progress work (through peer review, presentations, etc.) during the course.

The dissertation stage is not like this. You are not forced into spending your time in any particular way, and while your advisor will often give feedback on in-progress work, it is very different from the guidance that you'll receive during the coursework stage. This lack of structure can be a benefit: it gives you more freedom to spend your time as you see fit – to read what you deem important and to submit work for review according to your timetable (unless you have an advisor who imposes very rigid deadlines on you). More commonly, however, this lack of structure makes it harder to get things done since you have to impose your own deadlines and be disciplined about making consistent progress.

The second unique aspect of the dissertation is that <u>it is a much larger project than anything else you will have done during graduate school</u>. The dissertation is a longer and grander project than term papers or even a Master's thesis. Most of your projects prior to the dissertation stage are papers ranging in length from 3000 to 10,000 words. An adequate dissertation usually needs to be at least 50,000 words – perhaps significantly more, depending on your advisor's standards.[91]

---

[90] This section is based on my blog post "Dissertation Reflection Series, Part 2: A Different Kind of Project."

[91] My dissertation advisor specifically said that anything under 200 double spaced pages would be "too thin" to earn his approval; that translated to a minimal requirement of about 60,000 words.

Moreover, your dissertation needs to be cohesive: it cannot just be a series of standalone papers stitched together.[92]

The length of the project also increases the likelihood that you will get stuck at some point. You might be able to reliably crank out an 8000-word draft without getting stuck along the way, but the dissertation is so long and has so many components that it's unlikely to go so smoothly. You may discover weaknesses in chapters months after drafting them. Inconsistencies in your position may only become apparent once a large chunk of the dissertation is already complete. Since relatively small changes can affect how the entire work hangs together, revisions in one chapter can necessitate revisions in other chapters. Keeping the entire project coherent in your mind is much more challenging when it's this robust.

The third unique feature of the dissertation stage is that the stakes are higher than they were earlier in graduate school. What happens if you fail to complete a term paper at the semester's end? You take an incomplete and finish it after the semester concludes. Usually, so long as you don't take years to clear an incomplete, no one will care. And even if the paper is subpar, no one is going to care if you have an isolated B+ on your graduate transcripts. What happens if you miss the deadline for submitting to that conference? Nothing. After you finish prepping your paper, you find another conference and send it there.

What happens if you don't finish your dissertation before your funding runs out? Well, you probably get forced down the path of adjunct work to support yourself, and your chances of finishing it and finding permanent academic employment gradually decrease.[93] In the worst-case scenario, you will be dismissed from your program. Compared to most of your graduate studies, the dissertation is a high-stakes project. Beyond the risks associated with taking too long to finish it, its quality will also affect your long-term employability, since a significant portion of your early-career work will probably be derived from it. The importance of the dissertation creates additional pressure that can make working on it more emotionally and mentally exhausting than other projects.

The fourth and final key difference between the dissertation and the rest of graduate school is that dissertation work cannot easily be postponed. Many things in graduate school can be delayed with no serious penalties – so long as you do eventually get them done and they are of acceptable quality. Typically, it is not a big deal to put off a term paper or take an extra weekend to grade a stack of exams. But if you get in the habit of putting off progress on your dissertation, things will probably go badly for you.

---

[92] Since I began writing this section, I have learned that dissertations composed of a few extremely polished papers have become a more common practice. However, even in those cases, the papers usually must be interconnected or related in some significant way. Your dissertation is supposed to serve as the main identifier of your area of specialization, so writing on three unrelated subjects will not serve you well in this regard.

[93] The horror stories of folks spending 10–12 years in graduate school usually involve this situation: often, more than half that time is spent in this tragic ABD purgatory.

Once you have gone a week or two without making much progress on your dissertation, it becomes very difficult to jump back into the project and to re-establish the disciplined regiment required for consistent progress. This problem is heightened by the fact that the dissertation occurs at the very end of graduate school, a time when delays often cannot be afforded.

Now before proceeding to the next section, you may be wondering whether writing a Master's thesis makes writing the dissertation easier. Like a dissertation, a thesis does not have a rigid structure or concrete deadlines (beyond the defense date). A thesis is also much longer than a normal term paper, though still far shorter than a dissertation.[94] However, it does not typically have the high stakes associated with the dissertation, and often there is not a huge problem with delaying a thesis defense – especially if you are acquiring your MA on the way to your PhD.

I found writing a thesis to be somewhat helpful in preparing for the dissertation stage, but the project was still short enough that I only stalled one time – when it became clear I would have to retool my position in response to some strong objections. Recovering from a single lull in the writing process is not all that daunting. With the dissertation, in contrast, I hit significant lulls on three separate occasions, and recovering from two of those proved very difficult. Ultimately, writing a thesis may make dissertation writing a little easier, but just because you've written a thesis successfully does not mean that the dissertation will be a breeze.

How Do You Get Started?

Before beginning work on your dissertation in earnest, you will have to determine who will supervise your dissertation and what your topic will be. Depending on how your graduate studies have gone, you may already have identified who you want your dissertation advisor to be. Under ideal circumstances, this person will be a well-known expert in your primary area of specialization, meet with you regularly to monitor your progress and discuss important ideas, and provide prompt feedback on your written work in progress. Perhaps more important than any of these characteristics, however, is your advisor should be someone you respect – a person you would want to work with not just because of their intellect but also because of their character. Admittedly, in some departments, there may not be anyone who meets all of these criteria. In such cases, you may have to make some difficult decisions when it comes to picking your advisor.

Hopefully, by the time you are approaching ABD status, you have an idea of which professors in your department are the best mentors. If it is not clear to you, then one way to figure it out is by looking at what current graduate students in your department are happiest and most successful and which recent graduates finished their dissertations quickly and landed good jobs. Find out which professors have the best track records in your department. Be especially wary if you hear

---

[94] In my own case, my Master's thesis was about 30,000 words, and my dissertation was about 70,000 words.

reports of advisors that are abusive, manipulative, or just plain unpleasant to interact with – these are strong identifiers that your experience as their mentee will not be a positive one.[95]

If there is not a single person in your department that you think could serve as an adequate dissertation advisor, this could provide sufficient reason to apply to other programs (hopefully along with transferring most of your coursework-related credits). This is obviously an extreme measure – and an impractical one for most people at this late stage of graduate school – but if you are hoping to stay in academia for the long term, the dissertation will play a role in both your ability to secure an initial appointment and the trajectory of your research for the first few years following graduate school. Given its importance, you want to be working with a person who will help you finish your dissertation in a reasonable timeframe and produce high-quality work that can later be converted into publications.

Once you have an idea of who will serve as your dissertation advisor, you need to pin down a topic. In my own case, I identified who I wanted as my advisor fairly early in graduate school, and we had ongoing discussions about potential dissertation topics starting in my third year of graduate school. By the time I completed my coursework, I already knew what the subject of my dissertation would be. For many graduate students, however, the process of selecting a topic is not so straightforward.

However the topic selection process proceeds for you, it is vital that you pick the topic of your dissertation carefully. Your choice of dissertation topic will impact your academic career in at least three ways. First, your dissertation topic will determine your primary area of specialization (AOS) and provide an anchor for your research over your first several years after graduation. Second, picking a topic that is too obscure or where your contribution may appear insignificant can make it more difficult for you to find a job, which could prove fatal to your chances for long-term academic employment given the competitiveness of the market. Third, your choice of dissertation topic directly affects your chances of even completing the PhD program: as discussed earlier, most graduate students who do not earn the PhD drop out at the dissertation stage, and if you pick a topic that doesn't seriously capture your interest, then you are increasing the likelihood that you will not finish. It is hard enough to write on a single philosophical topic in depth for two years and even more difficult to do so when you are apathetic about the topic.

Now let's suppose that you are having difficulty selecting a dissertation topic. While I did not have that experience, Marcus Arvan did, and he wrote about it in one of the most widely shared posts on the Philosophers' Cocoon. In that post, he offers three major suggestions for finding a dissertation topic:

1. Do not focus on a big issue or big position prematurely. If the subject is too broad and the literature too deep, this can prove too intimidating for you to even know where to begin approaching the subject or what your original contribution to the discussion will be.

---

[95] For some further advice on picking a dissertation advisor, see this discussion at The Daily Nous.

2. <u>You have to find a big idea</u>. Successful dissertations are generally based on big ideas of one sort or another. A "big idea" in this context is your unique approach or argument that bears on the topic at hand. Marcus's was applying John Rawls' original position to the domain of nonideal theory. Mine was considering the implications of certain intergenerational ethical principles with respect to population growth. Yours will probably be something very different.
3. <u>To find a big idea, read… and read widely</u>. If you're having trouble pinning down a big idea, then you should broaden your philosophical horizons a bit and read material in a wide range of areas. Your big idea may come from an unexpected source.

To these pieces of advice, I will add the following based on my own experience and those of some other graduate students who had relatively quick searches for dissertation topics:

4. <u>Do not search for your big idea by yourself</u>. Consult your advisor and other professors in your department. Chat with recent graduate students about where they found their big ideas, and draw a little inspiration from their experiences.

Once you have a topic and a starting point for your dissertation work, you have to get to writing. In [another post about the dissertation](), Marcus suggests an approach to writing based on just getting material from your head onto the page. Write several pages per day without editing and then revise them later. This strategy can be effective if you're able to write daily and if you struggle to get your ideas down on paper. However, it does carry with it an element of inefficiency: you may write five pages of junk, and little of that content may make it into the dissertation. For some (including my own dissertation advisor), that's a tradeoff worth making, but if you're like me, you want to have a clearer direction for where your writing is going before you invest the energy to put it into print. That may require doing more work at the brainstorming stage of the project to clarify your main ideas and arguments before putting a ton of words on the page, or it might mean progressing at a slower pace with your writing so that your initial drafts are a little more polished than they would otherwise be.

Additionally, as I discussed in an [earlier section on writing strategies](), you do not need to write every single day to be productive. Instead of doing 2 hours per day of dissertation writing, you could adopt a Burst Writing strategy of 4–5 hours per day 3 days each week. Regardless of the writing schedule you adopt, the important this is that you <u>establish a routine and stick to it</u>. Whatever hours you devote to writing, they should be treated as sacred: you cannot allow these hours to be interrupted or rescheduled. Once you allow these writing blocks to become optional, it becomes too easy to procrastinate on the dissertation or allow weeks to pass with no discernible progress. Your writing routine must become an inviolable habit.

The Problem of Stacking Commitments[96]

Given that your writing blocks must be consistently maintained, it is worth addressing a couple problems that can make that difficult. The first is what I called the problem of Stacking Commitments. Because of the nature of academic conferences and the academic publishing process, you will often agree to do certain things many months (sometimes even years) before the deadline. If you submit to a conference, it will be several months before you know whether your submission was accepted and then another few months before you present your material. If you're invited to contribute to an edited volume or review a book, you'll have a long time to prepare your submission. If you agree to peer review a paper, you will usually have several weeks or even a couple months to submit your verdict and comments.

When you say "yes" to these kinds of commitments, you almost always do so with incomplete information about your long-term schedule. Sometimes, deadlines will fall in stretches where several other things must be completed. When your commitments "stack" in this manner, they can overwhelm you, which makes dissertation progress harder to achieve.

Now it might appear like there is an obvious solution here: just avoid taking on those extra commitments. This solution may work for some, but for others, it will not be desirable to turn down existing opportunities. Remember the circumstances you are facing.

To be competitive on the current job market, almost everyone will need some publications and conference presentations – evidence that you're an active participant in the philosophical community and a capable scholar. You're unlikely to be skilled enough to produce high-quality work early in your graduate career, so most of this will probably happen in your third year or later, and it needs to be done before you make your first run on the job market. That creates a substantial incentive to say "yes" to as many of these things as possible. After all, there's no way to know when similar opportunities will present themselves again.

What does this all mean? Often, it means you will be pressured to complete various side projects when you should be writing your dissertation. Sometimes, you will have committed to these projects before even defending your prospectus, and completing them may be crucial to helping you be competitive on the job market. These various non-dissertation commitments can stack in a way that makes it extremely difficult to prioritize your dissertation writing, as new project deadlines continuously pop up on your schedule. Every week spent writing a chapter for an anthology, finishing a book review, or preparing a conference presentation is a week of dissertation progress that is lost. If you lose too many of these weeks, your momentum on the dissertation stalls, and it becomes that much harder to get the gears turning again.

Unfortunately, if you are not willing to reduce your number of external commitments, then there is no easy solution to this problem: you just have to find a way to do both – build up your CV in

---

[96] This section is based on my blog post "Dissertation Reflection Series, Part 3: The Problem of Stacking Commitments."

the second half of your graduate career *and* make enough progress on the dissertation to be within striking distance of its end before you go on the job market. And hopefully, doing so doesn't drag out your graduate career so long that your funding expires!

I did not solve this problem when I was a graduate student: I just buckled down and committed to finishing all my in-progress items until they were done. Then, in my final year of grad school, I did my best to avoid any non-essential work that would interfere with the dissertation. That may not have been the best approach, though, since I still had to split time between finishing the dissertation and running the job market gauntlet – a separate problem that I will address momentarily.

With the benefit of hindsight, I think my mistake in this aspect of my graduate career was that I devoted too much time to tertiary commitments that were not all that valuable. I am hesitant to say that my time publishing papers was a mistake. While I may have published more papers than necessary for an ABD graduate student, I was told explicitly after starting my postdoc at the University of South Florida that my publication record played a huge role in how my file was evaluated. Instead of focusing less on writing for publication, I think I should have been less involved with graduate student senate and participated in slightly fewer department events. In both these cases, I think I could have decreased my involvement while still doing my fair share of service work and without hindering my professional development. If you are looking to reduce your commitments toward the end of graduate school, the best strategy is to start with what is not directly connected to publishing, dissertation work, or teaching.

Balancing the Dissertation with the First Job Market Run[97]

The end of graduate school is usually a very challenging time. You are trying to finish your dissertation and land your first job. To frame how to think about these dual challenges, let's imagine the ideal scenario. In this situation, you manage to get a couple publications during graduate school, and the rest of your CV is strong. You spend most of your summer finishing a full draft of your dissertation. Only revisions and the formal defense remain. You then devote the remainder of your summer and the first half of the fall toward job market preparation. You make sure all your statements are polished and that your writing sample has been thoroughly revised and edited according to feedback from your colleagues. You keep pace with the job market deadlines while revising your dissertation manuscript and schedule a January defense, ensuring that your dissertation will be done long before you start your first job (assuming you land one).

That all sounds fine and dandy, but it is quite different from how things actually play out for most graduate students. You may not be so close to finishing your dissertation when your first job market run commences, and the stress and tedium of filling out applications will take a substantial psychological toll. Additionally, as discussed in the prior section, some of your time will probably be tied up in outside projects during the last couple years of graduate school, which

---

[97] This section is based on my blog post "[Dissertation Reflection Series, Part 4: The First Job Market Run](#)."

may impede your dissertation progress. Depending on how kind the peer review process has been to you earlier in grad school, you might also be trying to tack on another publication to your CV at the start of the fall semester. The circumstances for your first job market run are not likely to be ideal, and you will probably still have dissertation progress to make while it's going on. So how do you balance your teaching, dissertation work, side projects, and the 70, 80, or even 100+ job applications you will be submitting?

Frankly, there's no miracle to be found here. Even the strategies for making the job application process more efficient discussed in Part 12 will not solve this problem. During the fall of my final year in graduate school, I had to postpone work on my dissertation while I prepped and finalized dossier materials (which took about 10 days of very intense work, in addition to the prep I had done in the summer) and sent out the first major haul of applications. Even after that, the job market continued to suck up time. Since there is no rigid schedule for job postings anymore, new ones appear throughout the winter and spring. The constant checking for new job postings and submission of new applications means that you will be committing time to the application process constantly until you have a job.

If you're fortunate enough to get some first-round interviews, these will also consume a lot of time. You'll want to research the department and institution that you might work for, and you'll want to schedule mock interviews to prepare. These interviews will, even if they go well, be very stressful, and most people who get these interviews do not get invited to campus visits afterward. The experience of getting an interview but then being eliminated from the search is often discouraging.

All this means that the job market will sap a lot of your time and energy. Theoretically, working on your dissertation during this stretch could function as a type of escape from the tedium of completing applications and the dismay of rejection letters, but it's very hard to remain focused on writing such a large project when your mental and emotional resources are so heavily invested in something else.

Grinding through the job market is brutal, no matter your career stage, and working on the dissertation at the same time makes it even harder. The good news is that this combination of dissertation work and the job market should only happen once. The best advice I can give is to just push through the 4–6 months that this lasts and then plan to take a significant vacation afterward to recharge (though not until after you've passed your defense and made sure all your graduation paperwork is in order).

Other Obstacles to Completing the Dissertation[98]

The previous two obstacles – balancing dissertation work with other commitments and making dissertation progress while on the job market – are common and foreseeable (at least if you intend to pursue academic employment), but they do not exhaust the various reasons why graduate students can fail to complete the dissertation. In this section, I survey a few others and consider solutions to them.

First, given that you will probably work on the dissertation for about 2 years, it is easily possible to have some form of personal crisis during that time. This could include (among other things) the death of a loved one, being the victim of a crime, a major health concern, or a serious mental illness. There is certainly no one-size-fits all approach to resolving these sorts of personal crises, but I have previously offered two general recommendations:

1. Resolve the personal crisis as soon as possible. If you need to grieve, then grieve. If you need to see a therapist, see a therapist. Whatever is necessary, do it. This may well cause a short-term loss to your work output, but the costs in the long term for trying to push through the dissertation while experiencing a crisis will probably be worse.
2. Select a mentor for your dissertation who will support you when things are not going well. Obviously, this is not the only factor to consider in picking an advisor, but it is one of the most important. If possible, ask former graduate students who have worked with the faculty in your department you are considering how supportive their advisors were when the dissertation was not going well.

Second, over the course of writing your dissertation, you may come to despise the writing process. Even if you generally enjoy writing philosophy, the dissertation risks become repetitive and tedious. Given the high-stakes of the project, it can also be very stressful. This combination makes it *very* tempting to procrastinate on the dissertation, which is a recipe for disaster. Do not succumb to this temptation and allow large gaps to develop in you dissertation work.

Third, you may get too bogged down in the literature to make efficient progress. The number of books and articles relevant to your dissertation topic may be utterly staggering, and it might seem impossible to identify where you can say something original and what all the pertinent objections might be. Fortunately, there are two straightforward ways to avoid this problem. First, as Eric Schwitzgebel would suggest, you can narrow the scope of your topic to something with a less robust literature. Your topic still needs to be something significant and of interest to specialists working in that area, but it is perfectly fine to have a dissertation that does not aim to resolve every big debate in the subfield. Aim for something less ambitious with a background literature that you could reasonably survey and understand within a single semester. The second way to avoid getting lost in the literature is to let your writing dictate what you read. Once you have finished your initial literature overview, do not read anything more unless it is specifically

---

[98] This section draws on a wide range of blog posts: Part 5, Part 6, and Part 8 of my Dissertation Reflection Series along with Eric Schwitzgebel's "Think of Your Dissertation as Your *Longest* Work, Not Your *Best* Work."

related to what you are currently writing or something you are advised to investigate by members of your committee. No one expects you to cover every piece of philosophy vaguely related to your dissertation topic (and doing so is likely impossible anyway), so do not set that as your objective.

Fourth, it is possible to become obsessed with revising and refining the dissertation in the hope of it being your best work. In some ways, that outlook is admirable, but setting your standards that high is often counterproductive: you can become so obsessed with developing a flawless dissertation that you never complete it. Remember that dissertations are rarely read by anyone outside your committee, and if you do manage to turn the ideas into a book-length project later, your dissertation material will need a big overhaul anyway. Again echoing Schwitzgebel, view the dissertation as your longest work – not necessarily your best work. Far better to complete a satisfactory dissertation than not complete your dissertation because you wanted it to be perfect.

As the End Approaches

The last few months of my personal dissertation writing took a heavy toll. Ideally, you do not want to have such an intense, stressful finish to the process. The good news is that the unusual combination of factors that often make the last year of graduate school so difficult only arise once in your professional career. There will be other stressors, of course, but the dissertation is a special kind of challenge since it represents the last and most important step in your graduate education – the critical project that makes a long-term academic career in philosophy a realistic possibility.

As I've written at greater length elsewhere, the main feeling you are likely to experience after completing the dissertation is relief. Over time, this may be replaced by a sense of gratification. The defense should not be too stressful: typically, your advisor will not allow you to proceed with the oral defense unless he is prepared to approve your dissertation. For these reasons, the oral defense is largely a formality at North American institutions. The tough part is getting there.

Nevertheless, I will close with one important piece of advice about scheduling the defense: make sure that you schedule the defense in a way that allows for it to be pushed back if needed. As a personal example, my defense was set for late January 2017, but a lull in my progress during my initial job market run led to pushing the defense back to the end of March. Fortunately, this had no impact on my ability to begin fall semester jobs on time. If you schedule your defense during the summer or even just late in the spring, you may not be able to push it back if something stymies your progress. Search committee members may also worry you will not finish on your projected timeline, which could cause them to select a different candidate for the job.

Part 10: Teaching Competently

For most graduate students, teaching is a frequent and important part of their experience. The number of students you teach and the particular courses you cover will vary dramatically across programs, but many aspects of graduate teaching are almost universal. Typically, you will spend 4–6 semesters of your graduate studies as a teaching assistant and then the remainder of your time in the program (or at least the remainder of the time you are funded by the department) as an instructor of record.

As a teaching assistant, you will aid a professor in the teaching of a large course. The instructor will choose the readings, design the assessments, determine the grading scheme, and establish the general course policies. These courses usually meet three times a week, and the instructor will teach during the main class meetings (where all students are expected to be present). You will have two main responsibilities: teaching the discussion sections for the course and helping the instructor grade assignments. Typically, you will teach 2 or 3 discussion sections with 20–30 students enrolled in each of them.

As an instructor of record, your responsibilities will expand to include everything about the course. All the decisions about assignment readings, assessments, grading, course policies, and what you do in the classroom will be yours to make. Naturally, this provides you with a lot more instructional autonomy, but it is also usually more work than you will have to do as a teaching assistant.

For the purposes of this guide, I focus on two types of good teaching: teaching competently and teaching well. Teaching competently, the focus in this part, refers to the general practices that I believe all instructors – even those right at the start of their teaching careers – should aim to meet. The standards are a bit higher than the absolute minimum for adequate instruction, but they are not nearly as high as what it takes to teach well. Most graduate students will not have the expertise or experience to reach that level of instructional excellence, but since teaching well represents a worth aspiration, I discuss it briefly <u>in Part 11</u>.

Teaching Preparation in Graduate Programs in Philosophy

Before discussing pedagogical strategies and challenges you are likely to encounter in your teaching, I must begin with some bad news. Most graduate programs in philosophy do not do much to prepare their graduate students for teaching. In "<u>The State of Teacher Training in Philosophy</u>," David Concepción and his coauthors surveyed philosophers in the English-speaking world to determine how they felt about the teacher training they received as graduate students. Here is a summary of the survey results:[99]

- ▪ 87.4% of emerging philosophers do not get tenure-track positions at predominantly research-oriented institutions.

---

[99] These figures and some discussion of them can be found in <u>this post on Daily Nous</u>.

- 84.6% of graduate students and early career philosophers "agree" or "strongly agree" that their graduate program should offer more teacher training.
- 89.2% of faculty in graduate programs believe their students receive fewer than twenty hours of formal teacher training.
- Only 10% of philosophy faculty leading teaching workshops for graduate students have expertise in teaching and learning.
- Only 21.7% of graduate students experiencing trainings report that their participation led to what they perceived to be significant improvement in their teaching.
- In only 2.5% of all trainings were participants expected to produce products to be used in future teaching.

Since the publication of these findings, there have been some developments in the profession aimed at improving teacher training. The APA meetings now feature regular workshops hosted by the American Association of Philosophy Teachers, and some departments have started to implement formal courses where graduate students receive more rigorous pedagogical training.[100] Nonetheless, the quality of teacher training across graduate programs still varies. It is quite possible that you will not get elaborate instruction in teaching effectively during your graduate education.

One further complication is that tenure-track faculty at research institutions are often not the best instructors. The university's expectations for them are heavily weighted in favor of research, and the quality of their research will be the biggest factor in whether they achieve tenure, awards, and promotions. Moreover, these faculty do not typically have heavy teaching loads. Thus, research-focused faculty are not incentivized by the university to invest substantial amounts of time into becoming better teachers, and they do not have as much teaching experienceas faculty at teaching-focused institutions. But the faculty who supervise graduate teaching assistants and teach them in graduate seminars are almost always tenured or tenure-track faculty with research-focused positions. Such an arrangement is often not a recipe for graduate students receiving exemplary teacher training.

I mention this problem at the outset because, depending on your program, you may need to pursue pedagogical development on your own to develop good pedagogical habits. This might involve attending workshops at your university held by your institution's Center for Teaching Excellence (or whatever it happens to be called) or browsing new publications in journals like Teaching Philosophy, Teaching Ethics, or AAPT Studies in Pedagogy when you have time. If your program has a group of graduate students that meet to discuss pedagogy, join that group; if no such group exists, try to create one among your cohort. I also recommend subscribing to popular philosophy blogs where pedagogical issues are discussed with some frequency, such as the Philosophers' Cocoon, Daily Nous, and the Blog of the APA.

---

[100] As one illustration, Heather Brant describes her experience in Colin Heydt's graduate seminar on teaching methods at the University of South Florida.

The Role of Teaching Assistant

Early in your graduate career, you will assist a professor in teaching a high-enrollment course. Usually, this will be an introductory-level course that fulfills a general education requirement, and most of the students will be freshman or sophomores.

Professors vary in whether they require their teaching assistants to attend the main lectures for the course, but you should attend them regardless of whether doing so is formally required. Knowing what has been covered during the main class sessions will help you understand how to design your discussion sections. Seeing how the professor teaches may also give you insight into what teaching strategies you want to implement (or avoid) when you teach your own courses in the future.

Leading Discussion Sections[101]

Leading discussion sections is one of your central responsibilities as a teaching assistant. These class sessions are typically 50 minutes long and, as the name suggests, focused on getting the students to discuss the course content. What exactly do you do to lead a discussion section? To some extent, it will depend on the instructor. The instructor may want you to cover a bit of new material and have the students discuss that. In other cases, you may be told just get the students talking and not worry about presenting any new course content. Sometimes, you may be asked to administer assessments like quizzes.

The one key aspect of a discussion section is that you are supposed to get the students to **discuss** aspects of the course content. This might seem pretty basic, but you may not receive much guidance on how to get the students talking productively. (Some faculty members seem to think that graduate students will just figure it out.) If a discussion section is not going well – that is, if the students aren't talking – then things can get uncomfortable very quickly. Moreover, if students feel like discussion sections are boring or pointless, their disengagement will get more pronounced as the semester progresses. That's an outcome you obviously want to avoid, so here are some pointers on having good discussion sections:

- **Always present a bit of material to the students** – even if it is not required. You might think that you can just come to class with a list of prepared questions about the week's material, ask the students those questions, and see where the conversation goes. That might work sometimes, but it's unreliable. Some students will not have done the assigned readings for the week, and some students probably missed at least one of the week's lectures. That means a large portion of students may not be familiar enough with the material to respond to your questions productively. Thus, you should always present a little material to the students, even if it is only a review of some of the key ideas or themes that were already covered in the week's main lectures.

---

[101] This subsection is a slight revision of this post on the Philosophers' Cocoon. For some additional suggestions, consult "Six Techniques for Being a More Effective TA" by Harry Brighouse.

- **Don't base all your questions on the reading material**. Echoing an important point above, you cannot assume that everyone in class (or even most of the students in class) will have read and understood the assigned reading for the week. If you want to dig into a key idea from the reading, make sure you review this material with the students first. But in addition to that, make sure you have a few general questions on tap that students can respond to even if they have not read one word of the assigned reading.
- **Use thought experiments**. Students tend to respond well to thought experiments – the trolley problem, the experience machine, Mary the colorblind neuroscientist, the prisoner's dilemma, and so on. While there's a legitimate debate to be had about the usefulness of thought experiments as support for premises in philosophical arguments, they remain effective pedagogical tools for getting students to reflect on philosophical problems. If you can identify a thought experiment that's relevant to what you're covering, consider using it.
- **Use real-world examples**. Many students, especially in introductory level courses that they are taking to fulfill a general education requirement, struggle to see the relevance of philosophy to everyday life. You can diminish that skepticism by basing your discussion in part on real-world cases that illustrate the key concepts for that week's course material. This strategy may be easier to employ in ethics courses (since ethical dilemmas manifest in the real world frequently), but if you're creative and willing to do some digging online, you may be surprised what you can find.
- **Use videos**. Students nowadays read less frequently than students from several decades ago but consume far more visual media. A short, relevant video to get discussion rolling can be effective, especially with the wealth of free, easy-to-browse videos available on YouTube.
- **Don't allow only a few students to dominate discussion**. Some students will obviously be more prone to participate in discussion than others, but you don't want your discussion section of 30 students to consist of you talking exclusively with only a handful of them. If you have trouble getting others to participate, consider having them work in groups or write down an answer to a prompted question at the start of class. Some students will be more comfortable participating when they have written remarks they can read or otherwise use to form their answer.
- **Get to know your students**. Your discussion sections will usually be small: about 25 students. Find a way to learn your students' names – either via the creation of a seating chart, sheer memorization, or some other method. Part of making these discussion sections go well involves crafting a relationship with your students so that they are more willing to participate. Also be willing to talk to them before class officially starts. Be polite, and be approachable.

As the semester progresses, you should be in frequent communication with the professor about how discussion sections are going. If students are frequently having a problem learning some piece of course content, then you should tell the professor and suggest that you review that

content at some point before the next major assessment. (Ideally, your professor will adapt the course content to students' needs, though this does not always happen.)

<u>Some Common Challenges</u>

Although fulfilling your duties as a teaching assistant are not as demanding as teaching your own courses, there are still some common challenges associated with this instructional role. Here are a few you might encounter:

- **Exploitative instructors**. Most instructors are aware of the challenges graduate students face to make progress in the program, professionalize, and teach. Thus, most of them will design their courses in ways that keep graduate student responsibilities manageable. For some reason, however, some instructors exploit their graduate students by making them grade a ludicrous quantity of work or complete tasks that are ordinarily the instructor's responsibility. There may not be much that you can do if you get stuck with an instructor like this except endure it for a semester and then make sure to never serve as a teaching assistant for that professor again. You could bring up the problem with the professor or discuss the matter with the chair of your department. But neither of these strategies are guaranteed to change anything, and these interactions might sour your relationship with your supervising professor – something that could make your current situation worse.
- **Students challenging your knowledge or authority**. One disadvantage of being labeled as a teaching assistant is that the students know you are not really in charge of the course. As a result, some of them may be more prone to challenge their grades or question your knowledge of the subject than they otherwise would. I will cover grade disputes in depth shortly, but in any of these interactions, it is important to hold your ground with the students while also being reasonable. That means knowing the course policies and grading standards and enforcing them fairly across all your students; if they try to pressure you into giving them special treatment, fall back on the policies outlined in the syllabus. Sometimes, however, a student raises a good point about course policies or has a question that you do not know the answer to. In such circumstances, the best strategy is to tell the student you will consult with the professor and then get back to them. Then put the issue on the agenda for your next formal meeting with the instructor and make sure you follow up on the issue during your next discussion section.
- **Low participation in discussion sections**. Ideally, your instructor will build some incentives into the course (such as graded in-class exercises) that encourage attendance, but even when they do, that is no guarantee that all of your discussion sections will be well attended or that the students attending them will be keen to participate. The techniques in the last subsection can help mitigate this problem, but if that is not enough, you can use other techniques to encourage participation. In my own courses, I give students short writing assignments in almost every class, and such activities provide an effective way to ease people into discussion. You can then just call on students to share what they wrote. Another option is to place students into small groups to discuss an issue

and have them designate one person to share the group's conclusions with the class as a whole. If you encourage students after they contribute to the discussion, that can also make a big difference. You want to create an environment where students feel they can share their ideas without being immediately judged or criticized – something that is especially important when discussing contentious issues like abortion or immigration policy.

Even if you are able to overcome these common challenges, you may encounter others that are more unique to your circumstances. Teaching is not easy, and getting better often requires trying things and seeing what works. Some of your attempts to motivate students or prompt discussions will fail, and some of your exchanges with the students might be awkward or uncomfortable. When you have a bad experience in the classroom, assess what you might do differently if a similar situation arises in the future. But do not dwell on it too long: no one is an excellent instructor from the start, and improvement takes time.

Grading for Your Professor

Your professor should provide you with a set of guidelines for how to grade assignments, papers, and exams. Yet I know from the testimony of graduate students that this does not always happen. If your professor does not provide anything written that contains these guidelines, then request that material. If they are not willing to provide any written guidelines, then request to meet with them to establish your own guidelines. You need clear grading standards so that you can justify your grades to students and administer the standards consistently, so if the professor has not devised these standards, then get them to work with you to develop these standards. It is irresponsible for a professor to leave you to grade their assignments without guidance when you did not design the assignment and have little experience in assessing student work.

When major assessments are submitted, you will have a lot of material to grade. Space this grading out over at least a week. Do not do all of it in 1 or 2 marathon sessions – this can lead to serious cognitive fatigue and result in inaccurate grading. If you encounter answers that you are not sure how to grade, discuss them with your professor. Leave feedback for students explaining your grades, but keep your comments relatively brief. Too much feedback will make it difficult for students to identify what is most important for them to improve, and a significant portion of students will not look at your comments at all (which means super long comments are often just a waste of your time). Leave short comments and invite students to follow up with you if they have further questions.

Grading standards across instructors will vary, and generally, you will not have the freedom to deviate from them much. Nevertheless, I encourage you to ask your professor <u>why</u> they use the grading standards they do. Part of the reason to ask is to aid your own pedagogical development, but the short-term reason for asking is that you may need to explain the reasoning behind the grading standards to students. Being able to provide a plausible explanation for grading standards

helps minimize grade disputes and makes it easier for students to understand what they should do to improve their grades in the future.

<u>Handling Grade Inquiries</u>[102]

One of the more awkward aspects of being a grader, teaching assistant, or instructor is handling students who confront you about the grade they received. Addressing grade inquiries is an inevitable part of being an instructor – it's not a situation unique to being a graduate student. No matter how clear your grading criteria or how much class time you devote to recapping mistakes from the most recent exam, there will always be some students who ask you for more information about why they received their grade. However, as a graduate student, these interactions can be particularly vexing since you will have less experience dealing with them. There are at least three distinct types of grade inquiries, and different responses are appropriate for each one.

First, there are grade inquiries that boil down to grade entry errors. One type involves the score on Canvas or Blackboard (or whatever learning platform your institution uses) not matching the score listed on the assignment itself. Another might involve too many (or too few) points being deducted on a particular question. Imagine a "-3" next to a 30-point question but a numbered score on the page of 25/30. Resolving these kinds of inquiries is straightforward: confirm that there's a mistake in how the assignment was scored or how the grade was recorded, thank the student for reporting it to you, and correct the score. Obviously, you don't want these grading errors to happen often: not all students will notice them, which means they sometimes result in inaccurate assessments of students' knowledge, and persistent errors of this type will cause students to lose confidence in your professional competence. However, you will grade enough assignments that some mistakes of this type will happen. That's okay; just correct them and move on.

The second type of grade inquiry, which is probably the most common, involves genuine misunderstanding. This is a case where a student sincerely does not understand why they received a particular score on a question or assignment. This could be because written comments given on the assignment were too minimal, they don't know how to interpret the feedback, or they were absent when you went over the exam in class. Handling these inquiries in philosophy courses tends to be more challenging than doing so in courses like physics or calculus. In STEM courses, instructors can usually reference an answer key and explain how the student made an error in their calculation or defined some term incorrectly. But explaining why a student's argument is not very strong can be trickier.

When students are evaluating an author's viewpoint or defending their own, some of them tend to think that as long as they give reasons for their opinion, that's sufficient for a high grade (even if you explain in class that this isn't the case). So, when you explain why they did not score well

---

[102] This subsection was originally posted on the Philosophers Cocoon in 2022.

on a question, you want to avoid pushing them to the knee-jerk reaction that you scored them low because you didn't "like" their opinion. If you've explicitly covered some of the basic aspects of good reasoning earlier in the course, you can reference those to frame your remarks. When possible, it can be helpful to mention what you like about the student's response and emphasize ways in which it could be improved rather than saying something like, "You said _____, and that's clearly wrong." It is appropriate to highlight things the student has said that are not accurate, such as if they misrepresent the position of an author you covered in class, but this has to be done carefully. Your feedback needs to be constructive rather than just being an attempt to justify the grade they received. Additionally, you don't want them to feel like your explanation involves a judgment about them or their character, since that may discourage them from asking you questions in the future. It's a tricky balancing act, especially with students who are not used to receiving and processing criticism. The good news is that most students who are making these grade inquiries will take your feedback seriously and try to improve in the future.

It's also worth noting that you may, in your discussion with a student about their answer, discover a small detail you overlooked when grading their response. These oversights usually only make a small difference on the exam score as a whole: a score of 17/20 instead of 15/20 is not going to make a big impact on a 150-point exam, for instance. Even so, if the student has a good reason to think they should be scored higher, then you should be willing to increase their grade. Just be sure to grade carefully so that these instances of grade correction do not happen frequently. As with grade entry errors, frequent mistakes in evaluating student responses will make students lose confidence in your ability to grade accurately.

The third type of grade inquiries, which are the least pleasant to deal with, are negotiation attempts. These occur when a student is primarily focused on increasing their score on the assignment rather than understanding the material better or just clarifying that the assignment was scored correctly.

The most common type of attempted grade negotiation is the end-of-semester email in which a student asks for a higher grade. The case of the pleading student who needs a higher grade in your course to boost their GPA is perhaps the most common example. This is a bullshit argument for two reasons. First, since their GPA is a reflection of their performance across a range of classes, your class will never be the sole determining factor in what their GPA is. Second, their cumulative GPA has no relevance to whether they were graded fairly on a specific assignment or in your class as a whole. Sadly, some students are taught to ask all their professors for higher grades as a tactic for improving their GPA. They think there's nothing to lose by doing so, and that's why some professors get absurd requests to "round up" an 88.6% to an A-. You should never change a student's grades for these reasons unless there's actual evidence that their grades were undeserved.

Negotiation attempts can also take place during the semester, though they are rarer. In my experience, they are usually undertaken repeatedly by the same student. These students may initially appear to want to know this information to improve their understanding, but often, that

is not what's really going on. Their real intentions become apparent when they challenge grades on assignments where the correct answers and their explanations are rather straightforward (such as a multiple-choice quiz) or when they challenge grades that are already in the A range. In one of my courses, a student challenged her grade on every assignment she submitted during the first 6 weeks of the semester unless she received a perfect score on the assignment. This eventually culminated in an exchange where she got very angry that I would not change a 24/25 on an assignment to a 25/25. After standing firm on my scores for several assignments in a row, she stopped with her negotiation attempts. Fortunately, across the thousands of students I have taught, only a few of them fit the profile of the persistent negotiator, and all of them eventually relented. The key is to stay firm in your judgments and not give them reason to think their negotiating behavior will be rewarded in the future.

It isn't possible to prevent all types of grade inquiries, but using the right approaches can make the experience less awkward. And as you teach more and refine your grading standards, student misunderstandings should become less frequent, which will make these interactions rarer.

Teaching Your Own Courses

If you are going to be competitive for teaching-focused jobs immediately after finishing your PhD, then you need solo teaching experience. Hiring committees for jobs with significant teaching requirements generally will not care about your experience as a teaching assistant because it does not resemble what you will be doing after they hire you.[103] So, if obtaining an academic job is a priority for you, make a point to acquire significant solo teaching experience before you go on the job market. Ideally, you can get at least a few courses' worth of solo teaching experience at your graduate institution, but if that is not possible, search for courses you might teach as an adjunct at nearby colleges or universities.[104] This section focuses on how to design and teach your own courses.

Teaching Competently

I earlier alluded to the idea of teaching competently and described it as the standard of teaching that all instructors should aim to meet – even if it is your first time teaching a class. The general sentiment behind teaching competently is that you aim to teach in a satisfactory or acceptable – but not necessarily exceptional – way. However, that does not mean that the standards for teaching competently are low: I suspect many instructors do not meet this threshold. If you reflect on your own undergraduate experiences, you can probably recall instructors who were thoroughly disorganized, graded in ways that were opaque or unfair, were unprofessional in their conduct, or made no effort to help students learn outside of class. Those professors did not teach competently in those courses. You can do better than that.

---

[103] This thought is echoed in various places discussing the job market. Here is one example from Marcus Arvan.
[104] Ideally, you can adjunct these courses during summer terms so that they do not overburden you during the semester.

Before discussing some of the nuts and bolts of designing your own course (such as writing your syllabus or designing assessments), I want to present you with some general guidelines for teaching competently. While doing all of these things is not sufficient for teaching competently, these practices will get you close to that standard:[105]

1. **Use active learning techniques in the classroom**. This is <u>arguably the most important item on this list</u>. Almost all students have taken courses where 90% of each class session was simply listening to a professor present material. Don't teach this way: make sure that a significant portion of class time is devoted to making the students engage directly with course content. The most common way this is done in philosophy courses involves discussion, but for the reasons mentioned in the next list item, this should not be the only method you use. If you need ideas for active learning activities beyond class discussion, consult [Appendix C](#).

2. **Do not overuse unstructured discussion**. Philosophical discussion can be very fun and rewarding, but the standard method of soliciting voluntary contributions from students can result in a handful of students dominating the discussion, especially in larger classes. Find ways to engage the students who are more reluctant to participate in the class discussion. Put them into small groups, give short individual writing assignments, have them outline an argument from a prose passage, or ask a simple open-ended question and solicit a quick response from every student in the class. Alternatively, give students some tokens or other currency that they surrender every time they speak in class. This essentially puts a limit on the number of comments a student can make in a given class session and will prevent a handful of students dominating the entire class session.

3. **Respond to student emails within a reasonable amount of time – no longer than 48 hours after they are received**. Some students expect near instant responses to their messages. That isn't reasonable, but taking longer than 2 days to respond to student emails communicates that you are not that invested in answering their questions. Some student inquiries are also significant and time-sensitive (such as a notification that they will miss an exam due to a medical emergency) and warrant prompt replies.

4. **Hold consistent office hours (whether in person or virtual) and encourage students to visit them**. I am consistently surprised by how many faculty members are only available for office hours by appointment. Don't do this: it suggests to students that you are too busy to talk to them. Students still won't visit your office hours often even if you are there and encourage them to come, but part of teaching competently is being available to help students who want your help.

5. **Prepare your students for your major assessments**. If your exams feature a section where they are required to identify informal fallacies in written passages, then do an exercise on that in class at some point. If your course features a term paper, give them small assignments, such as crafting a thesis statement or writing a paragraph that explains

---

[105] I originally presented these standards of teaching competently in [this post on the Philosophers' Cocoon](#).

their supporting argument, weeks before they are required to submit that paper. Whatever major assessments you use, do not expect your students to just figure out the material and develop the necessary skills on their own: use lower-stakes assignments to get them practice at these things before the high-stakes assessments later in the course.

6. **If you have control of the grading standards in your course, make them transparent to students**. Take time in class to explain to students common mistakes on major assessments, leave short comments on assignments to explain grading judgments, and correct genuine grading errors that students identify (e.g., grade entry errors, incorrectly scored questions). This sounds fairly basic, but I have heard many students complain that they do not understand a professor's grading standards and/or are not given feedback on their assignments. Don't be that professor.

7. **Grade assignments punctually**. For exams and papers, a turnaround time of two weeks is reasonable, especially in larger courses. For shorter assignments (in-class exercises, quizzes, etc.), grade them within one week. Students will often inquire about when large assessments will be graded, but do not be pressured by them to accelerate your grading timetable beyond these parameters.

8. **Do not binge-grade**. I already made this suggestion with regard to your grading duties as a teaching assistant, but it is worth repeating. You will be busy as a graduate student. It is easy for a week to go by before you remember that stack of exams that you need to grade. But grading all of your exams in a 48-hour blitz is not a formula for consistent or accurate grading. Under such circumstances, you will be grading some exams when you are cognitively fresh and others when you are very tired. This increases the likelihood of misreading student responses or making mathematical errors in how exams should be scored. It is also not a sustainable practice if you pursue an academic career: you will not be able to binge-grade later when you have a greater teaching load, so do not get in the habit of it during graduate school.

9. **Use your university's learning platform and keep your course site current**. As my career as an instructor has progressed, I have been persistently surprised by the number of professors who do not use Blackboard, Canvas, or whatever other digital platform the university provides to manage their courses. Even for an in-person class, these learning platforms provide an easy way for students to view their grades, submit assignments, review course documents, and so on. Learn how to use these platforms, even if only at a rudimentary level, and keep your course materials up to date as the term progresses.

10. **Check in with students who are struggling**. If you notice that a student is faring poorly on assessments or has stopped attending consistently, send them an email reminding them that you are there to help if they need it. Often, an encouraging nudge in this direction can help the student get back on track. If you do not hear back from them, consider reporting this to the student's advisor or the relevant academic support staff in your college or department.

11. **Respect university guidelines and policies**. Competent instructors know what conduct the university prohibits. Familiarize yourself with the standard policies – what constitutes academic dishonesty, when grades are due for graduating students, what responsibilities you have under Title IX, and so on – and follow these standards.

Following these 11 guidelines will get you pretty close to teaching competently, but you still have to design a course with relevant and accessible reading material, conduct engaging class sessions, and evaluate students fairly. Let's shift to those topics.

Writing Your Syllabus

The course syllabus is arguably the most important item in any class you teach. It not only communicates the course policies and grading standards to students but also provides an explanation of how you have organized the course and why. You have probably seen a lot of syllabi in the past, and some were surely better than others. The best syllabi are informative, well-organized, and interesting: in an ideal scenario, reading about the course will make students more excited to take it. Admittedly, it is pretty hard to write a syllabus that grips students in that way, but the other two features are not so hard to replicate.

Most likely, your university has a syllabus template somewhere online that includes all of the essential elements that they expect all instructors to include.[106] The template may not be organized in the order, font, or style that you want to use to present the material, but it will give you a list of ingredients that your syllabus should include. Ordinarily, your syllabus should present the following on the first page:

- The course's title, course number, prerequisites, meeting time, and classroom location
- Your name, title and/or pronouns, email address, office hour times, and office hour location
- A course description (that might carry onto page 2)

The remainder of your syllabus will include most or all of the following items:

- The required textbook for the course (if applicable)
- The learning objectives for the course
- A summary of your grading policies and the course's major assessments
- Expectations regarding attendance and classroom conduct
- Instructions for how students with disabilities should get approved for accessibility accommodations
- Relevant university policies (e.g., on academic integrity)
- A description of relevant university resources (e.g., counseling services, Title IX office) or a link to these resources

---

[106] That does not mean that instructors in your department will include this material, which is one reason why you should not design your syllabus based exclusively on how the faculty in your department design theirs.

- A tentative schedule for the course including the required readings and the deadlines for major assignments

Check your department and university policies to see which of these items are required and whether there are department- or program-specific learning objectives you need to include. Once you know that, you still have to make decisions about your course design. These decisions boil down to answering three questions:

(1) What do you want the students to learn in this course?
(2) How are you going to teach that material to them?
(3) How are you going to evaluate their learning?

Your answer to (1) will affect your choice of topics and reading material. For instance, if you are teaching introduction to ethics and think it is crucial that the students learn about some of the most influential moral theories, then you are presumably going to assign some readings on that topic. Your answer to (2) will affect what you do during your class sessions, and your answer to (3) will determine what types of assessments you use in the course. Let us consider these topics in turn.

Choosing Your Course Content

For whatever course you are teaching, you will have to make decisions about what topics you are going to cover and what readings you are going to assign. The best way to get started making these decisions is to consult some sample syllabi. Contact people who have taught this course before, and see what content they chose to cover. Alternatively, you can dig up syllabi for your course from the internet.

Once you have some ideas for the topics and readings you might use, think about how to structure the material in a cohesive way. What is going to link the content together? And how will it relate to the course's learning objectives? These can be tough questions to answer. When you are just getting started, it is perfectly fine to model your course based on how another instructor did it. When you teach the course for the first time, you will gain a sense of what works well and what does not. Then you can modify the course accordingly when you teach it again.

Nonetheless, there are a few basic principles you should follow when selecting your course readings:

- **Make sure the readings are accessible**. This has two meanings. First, it means that the readings can be understood by a college student in that course. In an introductory level course, that means they need to be intelligible to a college freshman with no prior training in philosophy. Readings from textbooks, magazines, and other publications aimed at a more general audience will often be better choices than academic journal articles and primary texts. The second meaning of accessible is that any student can access the content and interact with it appropriately regardless of ability or disability. A student with

a visual disability, for instance, should have a means of enlarging the text if they wish. Your university should have guidelines and resources related to promoting accessibility, and you should review those when designing your course.

- **Make sure your readings are not too long**. You may be able to read an 8000-word journal article in 45 minutes, but that could take your students hours (if they could even understand it). I recommend assigning students 20–30 pages of reading per week (and less if there is a major assessment that week).
- **If you assign a textbook, make sure it is affordable and that you use it enough to justify making it a required text**. Many students will have trouble affording expensive textbooks, so try to use a textbook that is inexpensive and only if using it really confers a pedagogical advantage over other available material.
- **Pick readings that excite and interest you**. It is very difficult to get students excited about the course content if you are not enthusiastic about it. Do not assign readings just because they are commonly included on syllabi for that course – there are tons of topics worth covering in most philosophy courses, so if something does not interest you, find a suitable substitute.

Once you have a selection of readings and a sense of how they fit together, you will want to think about how you are going to cover that material. What is a typical day in your class going to look like?

What Do You Do in Class?

There are no teaching strategies that work for everyone and a plethora of methods that can be effective. Naturally, that makes it difficult to provide generalizable advice on the subject. Even so, I will offer a few guidelines here.

As noted in the first guideline for teaching competently, [active learning techniques](#) are essential to keeping students engaged and helping them learn. Your courses should never devolve into pure lecturing. Simultaneously, it is possible to err too far in the other direction: if you do not give the students enough direct instruction, misunderstandings can emerge and go unnoticed until a major assessment. You want to strike a balance between direct content delivery and more interactive learning.

You have a ton of options for how you run your class sessions. You could start with 15 minutes of content delivery via a prepared PowerPoint, break the students into small groups to discuss a key question from the day's reading, and then reconvene to discuss each groups' viewpoints. You could begin with a video and then have the students answer some questions about it in writing. After that, you could explain the video's connection to that day's topic and present some additional material to the students. You could use a flipped classroom model and deliver your lectures through recordings posted to the course site; in that case, your in-class sessions could be devoted entirely to active learning exercises. All of these approaches (and many others) can be effective, and you will have to experiment to determine what works best for you. Whatever you

choose, it is a good idea to vary your class sessions to some degree. Do not just do the same thing every session for the entire semester. Students will eventually find any routine monotonous.

Another thing to consider in deciding what to do during class is how you are going to assess the students' learning. You want what you do in class to connect to future assessments. What students do in the classroom should prepare them for success later in the course. In that spirit, you may consider incorporating low-stakes quizzes or practice exam questions into your class sessions or spending some time in them workshopping papers in progress. Whether such activities are appropriate for your class will depend on what assessments you are using – the subject we should discuss next.

Designing Assessments

As with designing your in-class activities, there are a lot of options for what assessments you use to evaluate your students' learning. You also need to make choices about how the different assessment types will be weighted in your overall grading scheme. The two most common types of major assessments in philosophy courses are essay exams and papers. Constructing and evaluating arguments is a central component of most philosophy courses, and it is difficult to test student mastery of those skills without requiring them to do some writing. However, there are a lot of questions to answer about your grading scheme beyond just whether you are going to use exams, papers, neither, or both. Here are some of those questions:

1. Are you going to grade students based on attendance or class participation? If so, how will this be assessed, and how will you accommodate students who have excused absences?
2. Will you use quizzes in the course? Will these be administered in class or out of class? How much weight will they carry in the end-of-semester grade?
3. If you are administering exams, how many will there be? When will they occur?
4. Will your class have a formal final exam that is administered during the final exam period? If not, will the final exam period be used for some other purpose?
5. Will the students give graded presentations in your course? If so, what will the content of those presentations be, and how will you grade them?
6. Will you many any bonus points or extra credit available in your course? If so, how will students earn it?
7. Will students be able to make up major assessments (e.g., exams) if they are absent? Under what circumstances?

Even once these questions are answered, there are more specific questions to address, such as what format your exams will take, how long your papers will be, and so on. Here are a few general pointers for structuring assessments in your course:

- Do not make any individual assessment worth more than 25% of the end-of-semester grade. If your course only has a few assessments, then it will not be possible for a student

to recover from a poor grade on even one assessment. You will also get feedback on how well the students are learning less frequently. Thus, you should have several major assessments in your course.

- **Never assign two majors assessments within the same week**. Generally, your major assessments should be spaced out over the course of the semester. There should be enough time in between each of them for you to complete the grading and discuss the results of the assessment with the students before the next major assessment. This helps students process feedback in time to potentially do better on the next assessment and will help you return graded assessments more promptly.
- **Connect your major assessments to the learning objectives of the course**. For example, if one of your learning objectives is improving students' writing abilities, then writing assignments should be a significant part of the course. If improving oral communication skills is a learning objective, then consider including student presentations.
- **Scaffold long writing assignments**. Have students submit components of the assignment, such as a thesis statement, outline, or in-progress draft, and provide feedback on these submissions before the students submit their final drafts.
- **Even if you have no formal attendance grade, incorporate assessments that incentivize attending class**. In-class quizzes are one method of doing this, but you can also give students short assignments that are graded on completion. If you do not have some graded assessment that requires attending class, fewer students will attend class. Usually, this will result in lowered mastery of course content for the non-attending students and lower-quality class discussions.
- **Be mindful of the use of generative AI when designing your assessments**. Unfortunately, [generative AI has made it much easier for students to cheat](#) on a wide array of writing assignments. Software to detect A.I. use is, at least at the moment, unreliable and prone to false positives, and essays can be generated in only a few minutes with decent use of A.I. prompting (i.e., giving appropriate instructions to generate the kind of written output you want) and minimal editing. As a result, students are able to obtain decent grades on take-home essay exams and traditional term papers via academic dishonesty more easily than they were in the past. To combat this problem, consider conducting more assessments in class or making your writing assignments more complex such that generative AI is not able to produce work that would receive a good grade.

As for the content of your particular assessments, I once again think that a good strategy is to get samples from previous versions of the course. Email some past instructors to see what their major assessments looked like and see if you want to use any of their assessment strategies. Hopefully, you will already have some firsthand experience with what exams, papers, and other assessments look like from your previous experience as a teaching assistant and your past experiences in undergraduate philosophy courses.

Once your course has been designed and the semester is underway, you will need to prepare for your class sessions. Let us now consider what that involves.

Preparing For Class

If you are teaching competently, your class will feature a combination of direct instruction and active learning activities. The conventional method of direct instruction is talking students through course content with some sort of visual aid. One of the most commonly used visual tools is Microsoft PowerPoint. It is a rather easy-to-use digital tool, and its default themes and templates provide an easy means for arranging important information. [There is some disagreement about what features of a PowerPoint presentation make it good](#), but here are a few guidelines that that most tend to agree on – guidelines that I expect would extend to similar software used to produce presentations:

1. Any text on PowerPoint slides needs to be sufficiently large enough that everyone can read it from anywhere in the room. Note that this also applies to labels used in graphs.
2. PowerPoint slides should not be overly text-heavy unless there is a specific content-related reason for doing so (e.g., wanting to have all premises of an argument on the same slide as its conclusion, extracting an important quote from the text in full).
3. Whether text-heavy or not, slides should have 6 items of interest or less. Most people struggle to process for than 6 items at once.
4. Related to the point above, use basic animations (such as "appear") to make items on your slides appear one at a time. Displaying everything at once will cause students to read the entire slide while you talk about the first item.
5. Your PowerPoint should not be a substitute for personal notes when you present the material. Reading your entire lecture from PowerPoint slides is a surefire way to lose the interest of your students.
6. PowerPoint slides should not be so thorough and so detailed that they can substitute for students completing the assigned readings.
7. How you organize information in PowerPoints is largely a matter of personal preference: many different schemes can work. Your best bet is to look through sample themes and templates and see what best suits your preferences.

If you are going to use to PowerPoint or any other visual aid, that material needs to be prepared before your class begins. The same is true for any in-class assignment that you plan to have students complete. If your course features online assignments, you will also need to design those and implement them into the course site for your class. Preparing this material will probably require you to read or reread the material you are assigning your students to ensure that it is accurate.

Putting all this together, your responsibilities with regard to class preparation can feel overwhelming. You may also feel nervous about your course, which may motivate you to prep even more. Some graduate students believe that additional preparation will help their class sessions go well, but for reasons [I will discuss in more detail in the next part of the guide](#), this is not true. You need to resist the urge to overprepare for your classes. The time and energy you devoted to teaching preparation reduces the amount of time and energy you can expend on your

research, writing, and other aspects of your professionalization. You should not neglect your teaching, but you should be willing to satisfice with regard to your preparation. Your teaching responsibilities are just one aspect of your graduate studies and should not be promoted at the expense of the others.

Grading Assessments

In almost all cases where you are teaching, you will need to submit grades at the end of the term as traditional letter grades – A, B, C, and so on. Some will allow for plus and minus distinctions as well and have different GPA distinctions for these measures. For example, a grade of B may be valued at a 3.0, but a grade of B+ might be valued as a 3.3. Most institutions have general standards regarding what grade percentage corresponds to different letter grades, though you are free to modify this scale in your own courses so long as you make this clear in your syllabus.

The process of grading has some significant problems. For one, it often causes students to focus too much on earning a grade rather than on learning the course content or developing skill mastery. For another, grading standards vary dramatically from instructor to instructor, which means that different letter grades in different versions of the same course may not accurately reflect differences in student performance. Grade inflation – the gradual tendency for more and more high grades to be awarded[107] – also threatens one of grading's central aims. One of the main purposes of grading student work is to distinguish between the varying levels of mastery among the students. If virtually everyone receives an A, then unless all the students mastered the course content, the course grades no longer correlate with the students' knowledge and abilities. These concerns only scratch the surface of the moral challenges associated with grading fairly and accurately, and I cannot offer a comprehensive theory of fair grading in this subsection. Instead, I offer some general practices that can help you assess student performance in ways that minimize arbitrariness and bias, treat students equitably, and help you explain your evaluations to students:

- Develop rubrics for grading most complex assignments, and explain these grading standards to students before the assignment is due.
- Always leave comments or marks on assignments indicating why students lost points. These comments can (and usually should) be brief.
- Review common mistakes on assessments during class.
- Anonymize grading on writing heavy assignments to eliminate potential biases in your evaluations. (There is no need to anonymize the evaluation of work that is straightforwardly right or wrong, such as answers to a multiple-choice quiz.)
- Screen lengthy writing assignments for plagiarism and impose significant penalties when you believe students have plagiarized intentionally.

---

[107] There are many possible causes of grade inflation, but two of the major ones are institutional pressures related to instructors wanting better teaching evaluations and universities wanting higher retention and graduation rates. See Eric Schwitzgebel's "Grade Inflation at UC Riverside, and Institutional Pressures for Easier Grading."

- If you provide extra credit opportunities, limit extra credit to a very small percentage of the course grade (max of 1%) to avoid potential grade inflation, and make these opportunities available to all students. Do not honor requests from students to complete additional extra credit assignments.
- Make it clear in your course syllabus how you will adjudicate borderline cases – that is, cases where students are very close to a higher or lower letter grade – and stick to those standards at the end of the term.

It is worth acknowledging that there are some alternative grading schemes to traditional letter grades. Some of the commonly discussed approaches include ungrading, mastery grading, and specifications grading. However, even if your university permits some of these instructional approaches, I would not recommend using them early in your teaching career. You are probably more familiar with the traditional letter grade system of grading, and trying to learn a new grading scheme in one of your first classes (and getting your students to buy into it) is a recipe for a rough semester. Instead, if you are interested in an alternative approach, spend some time researching it and brainstorming how you would implement it after you have a few years of solo teaching experience and are more comfortable in the classroom.

Online Teaching

Most of your teaching experience as a graduate student will involve in-person instruction, but online instruction in general is becoming more common. You may have the opportunity to teach a course online before your graduate studies conclude. Thus, it is worth considering a few of the important differences between online and in-person instruction.

Online courses have two variants: synchronous and asynchronous.[108] Synchronous online courses have fixed meeting times where class sessions take place on a virtual platform like Zoom. Asynchronous online courses do not have regular class meetings. Instead, all of the course content is available online, and students work through it on their own.

The main challenge with teaching synchronous online courses is translating your in-class activities into an online format. Virtual platforms usually have features that allow you to mimic what you do during in-person courses, but these substitutes can be imperfect. For instance, you can simulate small group discussions by placing students into breakout rooms of 3 or 4, but unlike in a traditional classroom setting, you will not be able to observe all groups at the same time. That makes it harder to assess how the conversations are progressing and identify groups that might benefit from a quick bit of feedback from you. You will want to master using your institution's virtual platform so you can determine the best ways to replicate the active learning activities you use when teaching in person.

---

[108] While they are not typically classified as "online" courses, a third type of teaching that involves some online delivery occurs in "hybrid" courses. These courses are a blend of online and offline modalities. Usually, such courses meet in person half as often as in-person courses worth the same number of credit hours, and a portion of the course content that would normally be taught in person is replaced with online delivery of that content.

The main challenge with teaching asynchronous online courses lies in the preparation. Every single piece of course content has to be accessible to students via the online platform. That means that all lectures have to be recorded, all assignments have to be converted to online submission, and everything has to be organized such that students can easily navigate through all the content. You are also going to have far less direct interaction with students in this format, so it can be harder to keep track of students' progress and identify students who are struggling.

Before you teach online for the first time, I recommend reaching out to your university's Center for Distance Learning (or whatever it may be called at your institution) and seeing what resources they can provide, especially if they have material designed for instructors who have never taught online before. Sometimes, you can even get someone to review your course site and give you feedback on it before the course begins.

Evaluations of Your Teaching[109]

Whether you are serving as a teaching assistant or as the primary instructor of a course, you will receive several different types of evaluations. Reviewing your feedback and responding appropriately is a vital part of your pedagogical development. Most commonly, you will receive feedback in one of three ways: faculty observations, peer observations, and student evaluations of your teaching.

While different programs will have different norms and processes, you should expect your teaching to be observed by a faculty member at least once a year and perhaps once per semester. Teach during these classroom observations in the same way that you would during a normal class session. You are not expected to be flawless in your instruction, and any observation will include some suggestions for improvement. As a general rule, take the feedback from these observations seriously: while the faculty in your program may be more adept as researchers than instructors, all of them will have much more experience teaching than you and likely will have grappled with the same questions and challenges you are currently facing.

The second type of feedback is a peer observation. Typically, if you are a graduate student, this will be done by another graduate student. Some programs will have an established, regular rotation of these observations. In other cases, peer observations are not typical or formalized, and you may only get them if you request one from your colleagues. These observations can be helpful, especially early in your teaching career, when you are still looking for classroom strategies to fit your teaching style. A greater diversity of feedback may yield a wider offering of delivery methods, in-class activities, and assessment strategies for you to consider. These observations can be especially helpful if they are done during semesters when you do not receive a faculty evaluation since it ensures you will get some form of feedback every term.

The third type of feedback on your teaching will be in the form of course evaluations completed by your students. While the specifics vary a bit across universities, they are almost always a

---

[109] This section is a slight revision of [this post on The Philosophers' Cocoon](#).

series of questions scored on a scale of 1–5 with 5 being the highest score. These questions typically ask the students to rate things like their confidence in your knowledge of the subject, the general organization of the course, your availability for help outside of class, and so on. Most of the time, students also have the opportunity to provide open-ended comments. Your general target on the numerical scores should be a 4/5 or better, although this may depend on the question being asked. A score of 5/5 on a criteria like "reasonableness of assigned work" might be an indicator that students think your class is very easy – perhaps so easy that they do not have to intellectually exert themselves to excel in it.

Regardless of how good your numerical scores are, it is a safe bet that some of the written comments will be discouraging. Students may insult your character, claim the course has no value, or make weird insinuations about your personal beliefs. In these instances, it is important not to overreact to negative feedback. Student evaluations are notoriously unreliable indicators of the quality of instruction. Here are a few of their documented shortcomings:

- The empirical literature on student evaluations generally shows that they do not correlate with student learning or teaching effectiveness.
- Course evaluations tend to correlate with students' expected grades. Other things equal, an easier course – where a higher number of A grades are given – will result in more favorable evaluations than a more difficult course. As a result, some have argued that student evaluations contribute to grade inflation and encourage less rigorous teaching.
- Typically, all students enrolled in your course will be allowed to complete course evaluations, even if they do not regularly attend class. Thus, some students who complete evaluations may have a deeply inaccurate sense of what a typical class session is like.
- Student evaluations can be affected significantly by arbitrary factors, such as whether or not students have access to cookies when completing their evaluations.
- Student evaluations tend to be biased against female instructors. Overall, men are perceived as more knowledgeable and as having better leadership skills even though students appear to learn just as much from women as men. These biases may be more pronounced in large courses.
- Even assuming these evaluations are unbiased and reliable measures of student learning, they are still too imprecise to be an accurate way of assessing the quality of instructors' teaching relative to their peers.

There are also other problems associated with interpreting student feedback even if we bracket these considerations. One common problem, especially in larger courses, is that written feedback on these assessments tends to be internally inconsistent. Sometimes you may see one comment that praises your passion for teaching while another laments that you are not enthusiastic about teaching. One student will regard your lectures as boring while another praises them as extremely interesting. One comment may report that your course contained too many readings while another comment states the course did not cover enough content. When you have directly contradictory feedback, it is difficult to know which perspective is more accurate.

Another problem is that students sometimes base their assessments of your teaching on claims that are just false. Students will claim you do nothing but lecture even if you devote significant class time to discussion and other in-class activities. They may accuse you of grading based on subjective, arbitrary standards even if they have access to the grading rubric before submitting the assignment and even if your feedback references that rubric. In some cases, they may make remarks that reveal they do not understand course policies. Feedback based on clearly false claims should be disregarded.

As a teaching assistant, you will also sometimes be held accountable for things beyond your control. Students might comment on your evaluations that they did not like the exam formats or textbook choice, but as a teaching assistant, the primary instructor makes decisions about course content and assessment. You will usually have extremely limited – if any – influence on these choices. Students may also make direct comparisons between you and the instructor: a charismatic and experienced professor may indirectly cause you to be scored lower than you would be otherwise since you will look worse by comparison.

Overall, you should approach end-of-semester evaluations with a healthy skepticism. However, these evaluations do often play a role in tenure, promotion, and the distribution of teaching awards.[110] They will also be an important component of your teaching portfolio if you elect to apply for academic jobs. Thus, they should not be ignored. To reiterate, your general target should be a 4/5 (or equivalent) on your numerical evaluation scores, especially once you start teaching your own courses. Evaluations with these scores will generally keep you competitive with other applicants: higher scores are better, but most faculty are aware of the problems with student evaluations. Hiring decisions are unlikely to be made solely on marginal differences in the numerical scores on student evaluations.

Use your initial teaching experiences as opportunities to refine your teaching style and improve your weaknesses. Look for patterns across your evaluations (whether they come from faculty, peers, or your students), and if you notice a pattern of negative feedback in a certain area, then take some steps to address that in future courses. Additionally, remember that it will often be impossible to please everyone: some students, despite your best efforts, will not like you or your class. So do not lose sleep over occasional negative feedback.

---

[110] The use of these evaluations in hiring and promotion decisions has been condemned by the American Sociological Association and many other scholarly organizations, but as of the time of writing, it is not clear there has been any noticeable change in how these evaluations are used.

Part 11: Teaching Well

In the previous section, I covered various aspects of teaching competently – the basic standard of instruction that I believe everyone should try to meet. Teaching competently does not reflect the bare minimum of adequate instruction – it is a higher standard than that – but it is also not the highest standard of instruction. In this part of the guide, I briefly consider a more ambitious aspiration: teaching well.

Let me make one thing clear to you at the start: **teaching well is very hard**. I do not believe most university instructors meet this standard. Those who teach well do all of the things that a competent instructor does, but they also motivate students more effectively, use more dynamic assessments, experiment with new assessment strategies, adapt their teaching to the needs of their students, stay informed on developments in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and make efforts to support student research and scholarship beyond the classroom.[111]

Early-career instructors generally lack the experience and pedagogical knowledge required to teach well even if they are putting in the effort that it demands, and experienced and capable instructors are often too overburdened with other commitments to develop and sustain these pedagogical efforts in every course they teach. I do not think that most graduate students will be able to teach well (at least according to my criteria), but it is still worth discussing the topic so that you have some guidance on what pedagogical development to pursue as you gain more solo teaching experience.

Teaching Efficiently

I must begin with an important caveat to trying to teach well. As I [mentioned in Part 10](#), a natural tendency among graduate students is to try to improve their teaching by devoting more time to their preparation. Unfortunately, the relationship between preparation time and the quality of instruction is complex: more prep time does not always translate to better teaching.

Some preparation certainly leads to improvement: in most cases, 2 hours of preparation for class will lead to vastly better results than no preparation at all. But will 2 more hours of prep yield similar results? Are 4 hours of preparation significantly better than 2? Often, the answer will be no. Preparation time tends to follow a principle of diminishing returns: as preparation time increases, it gradually becomes less valuable. Thus, a 50-minute class session conducted after 4 hours of prep work may be virtually identical in quality to a 50-minute class session conducted with only 2 hours of prep work.

A further complication is that overpreparing can actually make the quality of your instruction worse. As Sam Duncan suggests in "[Teaching Smarter Not Harder](#)," there are many instances where designing class sessions around activities that require little instructor preparation actually

---

[111] With regard to this last point, I have in mind coordinating service learning and other experiential learning opportunities, supervising student research, and mentoring students in various other ways.

makes for a better learning experience for students. His chosen examples were hosting an ethics bowl competition in his introductory ethics courses and flipping the classroom in his logic courses. The ethics bowl competition is a unique learning experience for students that also features minimal grading and instructional preparation. Dr. Duncan did have to invest some significant time to recording lectures for his logic course the first time he taught it, he now saves considerable prep time with the flipped approach to the subject. This format also allows him to give feedback to students immediately as they work through problem sets in class.

In my own courses, I devote some class periods to group exercises anchored around a complex case or portions of class to short student presentations on a topic related to an assigned reading. Such activities do not just serve to enhance students' learning; they also add variety to the class routine. A persistent pattern of structured lectures with no variance – even if they are well delivered – will eventually lead to monotony and student disengagement.

There are two further reasons not to devote excessive prep time to your teaching. First, echoing a theme from earlier portions of the guide, your cognitive resources are finite: hours devoted to teaching are hours that you are not devoting to some other cognitively demanding activity. Research must be a significant priority throughout your graduate career if you are to be competitive on the job market, so you cannot invest all your energies into teaching at the expense of developing a viable research program.

The final reason not to overprepare for teaching is that you want to develop teaching habits in graduate school that are sustainable in other positions. In graduate school, it is theoretically possible to devote 10 hours per week just to preparing for the classes you teach. If you are teaching solo, you are likely just teaching one course, and if you are a teaching assistant, you only have to prepare for discussion sections. But if you land a job after getting your PhD, the teaching demands will almost surely be greater, and you will not be able to devote that much prep time to every class. You might be teaching 3 or 4 courses each semester. Since you will need to balance your teaching prep with other pedagogical responsibilities (e.g., grading, meetings with students, writing letters of recommendation) and your duties tied to research and service, you do not want your teaching preparation to be excessive.

At this juncture, we come to the first crucial feature of an instructor that teaches well: they teach effectively *and* efficiently. As a result, their teaching practices are sustainable even with heavy teaching loads.. What else separates instructors that teach well from instructors that teach competently?

Learning to Love One's Students[112]

One of the most important features of teaching well is having the right disposition toward one's students. The best instructors sincerely love their students. On my understanding, love for one's students refers to taking genuine enjoyment in interacting with students and having an

---

[112] Significant portions of this section come from the blog post of the same title at the Philosophers' Cocoon.

appropriate empathy and compassion for them as people. In an APA panel I once attended about [teaching demonstrations](#) (a common feature of on-campus interviews for teaching jobs), David Concepción claimed that the best job candidates typically had 3 distinctive features:

1. They were experts in their discipline, which means they knew the subject matter they were trying to teach.
2. They were experts in pedagogy, which means that they knew what teaching techniques were effective and how to implement them in the classroom.
3. They loved their students.

Dr. Concepción then made a surprising claim: he said that virtually all job candidates that made it to this stage of the search (i.e., finalists visiting the campus) had the first two characteristics, but most of them lacked the third. Everyone had the disciplinary and pedagogical expertise, but few of them loved the students.

And yet, this disposition is perhaps the most important quality of an excellent instructor. Teaching well is not just about designing a coherent syllabus, communicating the course content effectively, and assessing student ability accurately. It is also about cultivating a certain kind of relationship with students – about showing them respect, rousing their curiosity, and collaborating with them in the cooperative enterprise of learning. It means listening to their fears and concerns, encouraging them in their times of stress and failure, and offering help when you can while also treating everyone in your courses fairly. Investing in them in this way requires an earnest form of compassion that does not come naturally to everyone.

During the Q&A session of that panel, I asked how a person can cultivate such a powerful disposition if they do not naturally have it. After all, not everyone is inclined to love their students. Sometimes, this is because our expectations are just too high. Graduate students may think the A-level students that they teach will produce work similar to what they produced as undergraduates, but that is doubtful: you were an exceptional undergraduate philosophy student if you made it into graduate school; even the best students in your courses are unlikely to match that ability level.

Even when our expectations for our students are realistic, however, there are times when student interactions strain our patience. Answering email inquiries about issues addressed in the course syllabus never feels like a great use of our time. Grade disputes can be tense and awkward. Occasionally, we must assess what to do in cases of plagiarism – a tedious, sad, and stressful process for both instructor and student. And perhaps most significantly of all, no matter what you do, it seems like a portion of your students just don't give a damn about the class. They attend reluctantly (if at all) and fiddle with their phones for the entire class period or do something that similarly reflects disengagement (e.g., not participating in group activities, listening to music on their headphones). All these things can make it hard to love your students. So, what do you do to cultivate this elusive disposition?

Let's start with what you should <u>not</u> do. Above all else, you must resist the tendency to view your students as inferior, annoying, stupid, irresponsible, or otherwise inept because of the quality of work they produce or the seeming immaturity of their behavior. Making such judgments hinders your ability to really care about your students and enjoy interacting with them in the ways necessary to teach well.

One of the more common practices that graduate students must avoid is student bashing – the process of disparaging student work during the grading and evaluation process. There are moments when we can't help but laugh or be puzzled by what our students write – that's probably unavoidable – but using our students' work as a basis for tearing them down in the eyes of our colleagues is not so involuntary and much more harmful. When we engage in this practice, we are making fun of our students for their intellectual inferiority and doing it behind their backs. One could regard it as the academic equivalent of bullying. Grading is not fun, and grading bad student work is even less fun. Student bashing is tempting because it makes the process a little more enjoyable, it can serve as a kind of bonding experience among the you and your colleagues (if they participate), and it makes you feel intellectually superior to others – no small benefit in an environment where your work faces constant scrutiny and criticism.

But none of these purported benefits are sufficient to justify the practice. It is clearly unethical because it is disrespectful to your students. It is also professionally counterproductive because it promotes pedagogical vices that you should avoid. The practice encourages you to see your students as flawed and inferior and to view their work as lacking merit or value. If you make this a habit, it can seep into your interactions with them and the way you teach in the classroom. These attitudes are not consistent with trying to love your students.

Such negative judgments are also probably unjustified. There are certainly some students who do not prioritize your class appropriately or do not care about doing well in it, but it's a mistake to characterize the majority of students that way. Many of our students are trying to manage a full-time job with their studies. Others have significant disabilities that hinder their learning experience but that they do not disclose for fear of the social stigma attached to being viewed as disabled. Some are in a similar situation regarding a mental illness, and others are just struggling to cope with a failing personal relationship or a difficult family life.

Not making negative judgments about your students is a good first step in the process of learning to love your students, but it is far from sufficient. What else should you do? Here are some suggestions:

- **Be learner-centered**. An instructor who is learner-centered approaches each class by asking what the students need to be asked, what needs to be done with them, or what needs to be done for them if they are to learn as much as possible on a given day. Approaching pedagogy this way requires a significant amount of concern for your students' needs, so it facilitates caring about them.

- **Be humble**. In part, this means that you acknowledge when you make mistakes, but it also means that you demonstrate a willingness (through your actions and not just through words) to improve your teaching and a belief that you can do so. Exhibit curiosity about pedagogical matters, and solicit student feedback about what they think works best or what doesn't.[113]

- **Make an effort to interact with students outside of class**. Hold office hours frequently, and always be available when you say you will be available. Allow students to make Zoom appointments if they would rather meet with you in that format. Require students to visit your office hours as an assignment or encourage it with an offer of a point or two of extra credit. Getting to know them a little outside the context of your classroom goes a long way toward viewing them as the multidimensional human beings that they are.

- **Avoid shaming students for what they do wrong**. It's fine to be a tough grader and to impose harsh penalties for lateness or a failure to follow directions, but that does not require trying to make students feel bad about their mistakes. You're not in position to know why those mistakes were made, so resist the temptation to make such judgments. Remember that students are people just as we are and that all people make mistakes now and then.

- **Assume that your students have interesting things to say**. Do not approach class discussion like you already know everything that's going to be said. It's hard to love your students when you're indifferent to their input. Instead, expect your students to be creative and expect to learn something new about the subject matter during discussion.

- **Remember that your class is not the top priority for most of your students**. A typical student in an undergraduate philosophy course will be taking several other classes, majoring in a different subject area, and participating in a few extracurricular activities. Students are not all philosophically minded academic hermits, and your interactions with them should reflect that fact. Be mindful of their circumstances, and do not be dismissive of the interests they have that go beyond your course.

Following these guidelines and making a conscientious effort to care about your students can make a big difference. Of course, it still takes a lot of time and effort to cultivate the proper disposition, but that's no different than trying to cultivate any other virtue. The good news is that even if you are not naturally inclined to love your students, trying to do so is not a lost cause: habituation *can* get you there eventually.

---

[113] You may get some feedback in this regard from student evaluations at the end of the semester, but I encourage you to give students more customized surveys where you ask students about specific activities you did or material you covered.

What Bridges the Gap from Competence to Excellence?

It is not easy to specify precisely how someone ascends from teaching competently to teaching well. As you can gather from the prior section, one of the key ingredients to that process is developing a love for one's students. What else separates excellent instructors from competent ones? Here are some of the key features:

- An instructor who teaches well has <u>refined their teaching techniques through many years of experience</u>. They generally know what assignments and practices work best for teaching certain types of subject matter, and they are constantly trying to improve how they engage and assess students.
- An instructor who teaches well is <u>an expert on the subject they are teaching</u>. This could be because the course is in the instructor's area of specialization or because they have taught the course many times. Either way, they know the material and can answer students' questions with ease.
- An instructor who teaches well has developed <u>an authentic and charismatic teaching persona</u>. These instructors are completely comfortable in the classroom and hold students' attention.
- An instructor who teaches well <u>never panics</u>. Even when the classroom technology fails or something else goes wrong, they shift seamlessly to a different teaching strategy and show no signs of worry or discomfort.
- An instructor who teaches well <u>adapts to the needs of the students</u>. The instructor is receptive to student feedback and willing to alter lesson plans and assignment deadlines to accommodate the learning needs of the class.
- An instructor who teaches well <u>motivates and challenges students without setting unrealistic standards for success</u>. The instructor deftly balances the need for the course to be intellectually rigorous with the need for students to be able to succeed. Courses that are taught well do not feel like easy A's for the students, but they also do not feel brutal, unfair, or punitive.
- An instructor who teaches well <u>updates their courses in a continued effort to improve them</u>. The instructor does not simply leave the curriculum for a course static semester after semester. They continue to think of ways it could be improved.

I am certain that this is not an exhaustive list, but it should provide a sense of what you should aspire to in your teaching as you approach the end of your graduate studies.

Teaching Exceptionally

I have suggested throughout this part of the guide that most graduate students will not be able to teach well and that they should focus on teaching competently instead. Nevertheless, I want to close by mentioning that I think there is at least one level of pedagogical excellence above teaching well: teaching exceptionally.

Exceptional teachers are exceedingly rare: I have met only a few people in my lifetime that I believe are worthy of the label. These extraordinary instructors not only meet all the standards associated with teaching well – they go above and beyond those standards. They are the paragons of teaching excellence. They challenge students while also finding creative and engaging ways to help them succeed and realize their potential. They establish cordial and supportive relationships with their students and go to great lengths to assist students who are struggling. They typically contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning and are among the leaders of pedagogical innovation at their institutions. Their enthusiasm for teaching is genuine and infectious. These instructors tend to be beloved by their students and are frequent recipients of teaching awards.

Graduate students should not try to teach exceptionally so early in their teaching careers. I mention this category of instructors for a different reason. You may, if you are fortunate, cross paths with someone who teaches exceptionally. In the best-case scenario, you will serve as a teaching assistant for them for a semester. Under such a circumstance, you should learn as much about teaching from them as you can. Ask them about how they design their assignments, why they use class time the way they do, and how they interact with students. While you are unlikely to mimic everything they do in the classroom, you will gain many new insights about teaching and what teaching excellence requires. If you do not serve as a teaching assistant for someone like this, try to identify the best instructor in your department, and ask to attend some of their classes as an observer. As I mentioned earlier, tenured and tenure-track philosophers at research universities are generally not the best instructors (and are not incentivized by their universities to develop their teaching abilities). Thus, if you encounter an exceptional teacher, you want to take advantage of opportunities to interact with that person. In doing so, you can accelerate your pedagogical development and get a glimpse of what teaching mastery looks like.

Additional Resources

My remarks in this part of the guide only scratch the surface of what it means to teach well. A comprehensive account of that topic would take many books to cover with the breadth it demands. In that spirit, here are a few resources that you may find useful if you want to improve the quality of your own teaching:

- TeachPhilosophy101
- Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*
- Peter Brown, Henry Roediger III, and Mark McDaniel, *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*
- James Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*

Part 12: Navigating the Job Market

There is so much material floating around online about the academic job market that this single section could easily eclipse the length of the entire rest of the document. So, before getting into the thick of it, let me clarify my aims here.

This section is a general overview of the current state of the job market in academic philosophy, how people typically apply for jobs in academic philosophy, and how applying for academic jobs will affect the last year of your graduate studies. I have tried to be thorough here, but some aspects of job market preparation – particularly the development of your writing sample, statements, and other job market documents – will change significantly depending on your philosophical background and expertise. The advice in these sections will not provide guidance for every facet of your unique personal circumstances. Thus, a significant portion of your preparation should be done in consultation with your graduate advisor and the placement director in your program – people who have some familiarity with your work, teaching experience, personal goals, and so on.

Just How Bad Is the Job Market?

The job market for academic positions in the humanities is dreadful. Following the recession in 2008, the number of available academic positions shrank dramatically, and it isn't clear that things have improved since then. Almost any tenure-track job will have hundreds of applicants, and only *one* person can get the job. Even non-tenure-track positions will get a similarly massive number of applicants. What this means in practice is that getting a stable job in philosophy is incredibly difficult. Moreover, if you are not willing to move across the country (or perhaps to another country), your chances of getting a job decrease dramatically.

The job market was also recently impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. There were far fewer jobs advertised in the 2020–2021 academic year compared to the prior decade, and even though the number of jobs rebounded the following year, the number of applicants increased, so the market was still tougher to navigate than usual.[114] At the time of writing, the philosophy job market appears to have returned its pre-pandemic norms, but applicants still face incredibly stiff competition for a rather limited number of jobs. It has actually been that way in the humanities for a while. As the graph below[115] illustrates, almost 46% of those who received humanities PhDs in 2014 did not have employment commitments when they graduated.

---

[114] Many graduate students delayed the defense of their dissertation, and others (including me) got their appointments extended for an additional year so that they could avoid going on the market in 2020–2021. The result is that the 2021–2022 academic year had far more people applying for jobs than usual.

[115] The graph originates from Laura McKenna's "The Ever-Tightening Job Market for PhDs."

Percentage of Doctoral Recipients Without Employment Commitments, 2014

	All fields	Life sciences	Physical sciences	Social sciences	Engineering	Education	Humanities	Other
	38.6	42.1	36.2	31.20	43	35.4	45.7	31.6
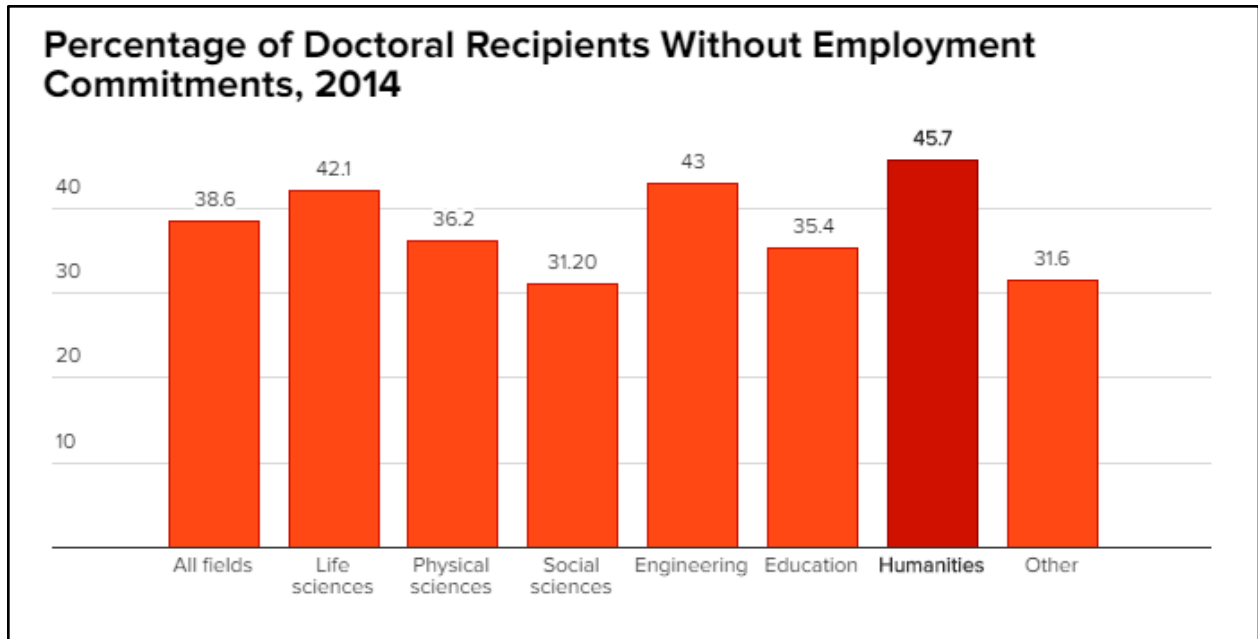
Other data corroborates this unsettling statistic. <u>An examination of trends in the employment of humanities graduate students from 1990 to 2020 conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences</u> shows the percentage of graduates with full-time employment has decreased overall during that time – dropping from about 68% in 1990 to 59% in 2020 (with employment in 2014–2016 trending closer to 50%). A graph of the relevant data can be found on the next page.

Careful examination of the data presented shows two other important trends. First, it is becoming less common for recent graduates with humanities PhDs to obtain professorial positions (whether tenure-track or non-tenure-track): that figure declined from 63% in 1990 to 47% in 2020. Second, postdoctoral appointments have become more common during that same time period, accounting for 10% of appointments in 2020 despite only accounting for 5% of appointments in 1990. These two trends help to explain why it is becoming more common for doctoral graduates in the humanities to hold at least one temporary appointment before landing a long-term position.

III–20a: Share of Doctorate Recipients in the Humanities with a Definite Employment or Postdoctoral Study Commitment at Time of Graduation
1990–2020
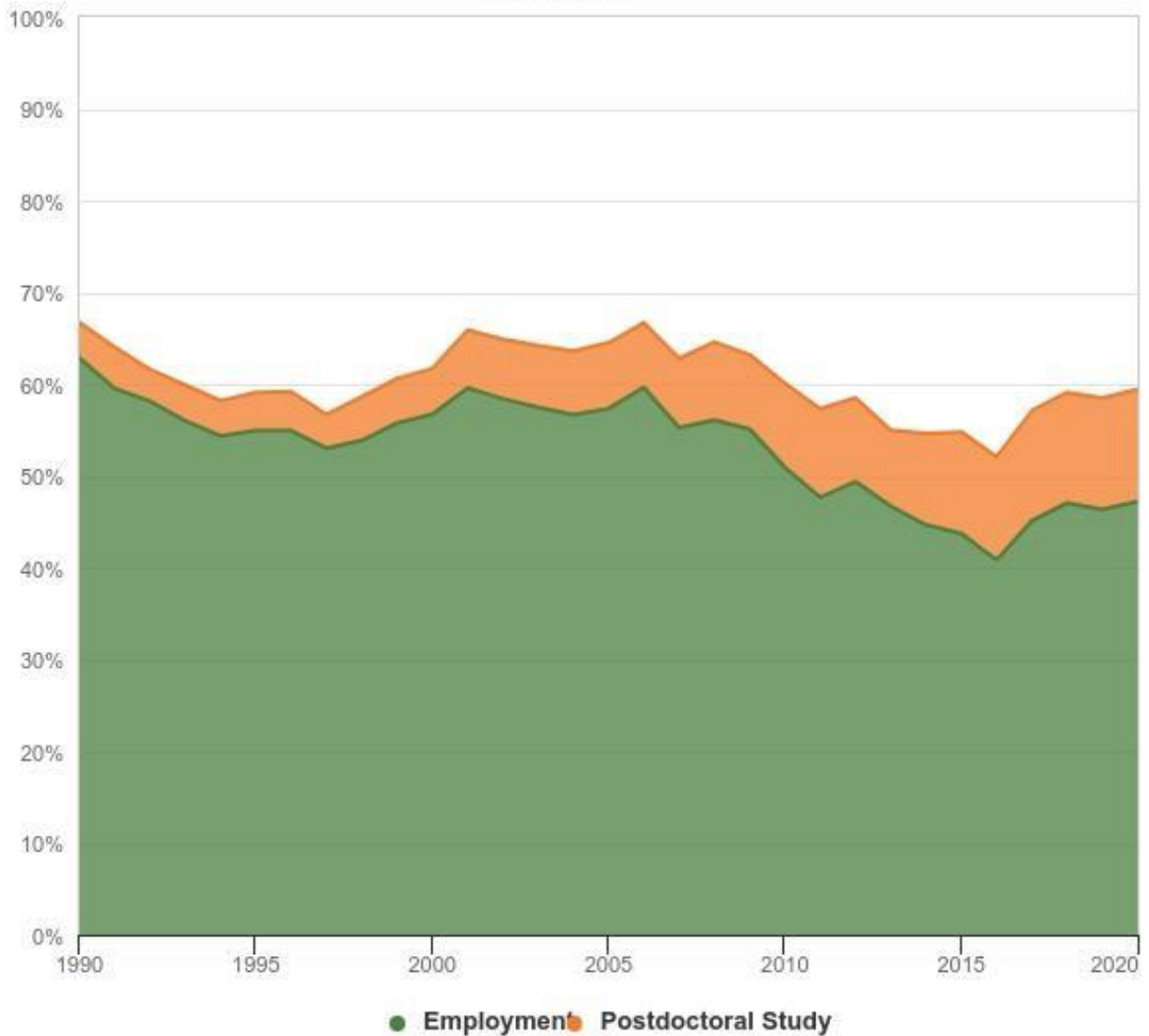
Humanities Indicators, 2022|American Academy of Arts & Sciences

I must also emphasize an obvious fact from these figures: many humanities PhDs do not get any academic appointment. This fate is not limited just to underachieving or below-average graduates. In fact, the academic job market is so competitive that even those who have a robust breadth of teaching experience and a wide array of quality publications are often unable to find permanent employment, and those who do succeed in finding such a job usually only do so after

stringing together a few short-term positions and navigating an annual job search several times.[116]

The dismal nature of the job market has two important implications. First, you need to prepare for the worst-case scenario regardless of how accomplished you are. That means that you need to consider what you would do if you do not acquire *any* academic job during your first run on the job market. Second, you need to psychologically steel yourself for a relentless barrage of rejection. What kind of rejection? Let me give you an example:

> Trevor Hedberg
>
> Thank you for your interest in the position of Ethics Professor with the Philosophy Department at the University of Narnia!
>
> After reviewing the applications, yours was not selected for further consideration. We received over 350 applications and the hiring committee had to make extremely difficult decisions between many highly qualified candidates.
>
> We wish you success and encourage you to continue in your academic and professional pursuits.
>
> Thank you again for your interest in the University of Narnia!

Aside from the obvious change to the university name, this is an exact copy of an email I received after I failed to get a first-round interview for an assistant professor position. You may well see dozens of these during your first year on the job market, and it can be extremely discouraging. If you're going to keep a level head in the last 6 months of your graduate career, you've got to find a way to swallow these rejections without being overwhelmed by stress and dismay. That is, I'll admit, easier said than done.

Additionally, because the market is so competitive, you may develop a tendency to examine every aspect of your application materials and scrutinize every facet of the application process looking for an advantage. To give one example, there are evidently some people who wonder about whether submitting their application sooner might be to their advantage because of psychological effects associated with *when* a person reads certain material. Obsessing over minutiae of this sort is pointless: there are many random factors that affect job market outcomes, and in many cases, you will not have the means of reliably influencing them. Fixating on these elements of the process will only increase your stress and distract you from getting things done.

The picture I have sketched here may sound rather bleak, but there are some small bits of good news worth mentioning. First, despite the fixation on department rankings, you are not doomed to fail on the job market if you come from an unranked or otherwise undistinguished program. You may be able to deduce this fact from looking at enough department placement webpages,

---

[116] For some illustrations of this phenomenon, see Greg Stoutenburg's biographical blog post "Sweat Equity on the Philosophy Job Market" and Jeremy Davis's "My Five Years on the Philosophy Job Market."

but the quicker route would be to examine the data compiled as part of the [Academic Philosophy Data and Analysis (APDA) Project](). While it is true that higher ranked programs are often more successful at placing their graduate students in research-focused jobs, that does not always mean that they have better placement rates overall.

A second important bit of good news is that you are not powerless to improve your job prospects in philosophy. While there is a great deal of luck involved in the process, the job market functions in many ways like a weighted lottery, and as we will soon discuss, you can do quite a few things to increase your odds of success.

Another important thing to know is that jobs are not distributed equally across areas of specialization (AOS). Jobs in ethics and political philosophy tend to be the most common. Jobs in areas like philosophy of language, aesthetics, metaphysics, and epistemology are relatively rare. Thus, if your AOS is in moral philosophy, you will probably submit more job applications than a person with an AOS in metaphysics.

Additionally, many jobs each year are classified as "open" with regard to AOS, which means that there is no explicit requirement for applicants to have a particular research expertise. These jobs also attract by far the highest number of applicants. It is normal for jobs in popular areas of specialization to have about 150 applicants, but "open" jobs can have 400 or 500 applicants.[117] You should still plan to apply for these jobs, but your chances of success with those applications are even lower than normal.

Before moving on, there is one other important detail to mention. Your first appointment after graduate school is arguably the most important job placement of your career. Even though it is becoming rarer for graduate students to get tenure-track jobs immediately out of graduate school, your initial placement will play a huge role in your career trajectory after graduate school. In a teaching-heavy position, it may be difficult for you to be competitive for permanent positions in future job searches, especially if you are on a 1-year contract and must go back on the job market immediately.[118] In contrast, a post-doc with a light teaching load or a multi-year VAP at an R1 institution may help you build credentials that make you more competitive for permanent jobs in your next search. Given the significance of your first appointment, you want be well-prepared for your first run on the job market.

Distribution of Jobs by Area of Specialization (2013–2019)

Systematic attempts to compare how job offerings are distributed across different areas of specialization are rare. Perhaps the most notable effort to date was Spencer Hey's graphical compilation of data gathered from postings on [PhilJobs]() from 2013–2019. He filtered job

---

[117] I received rejection notices for some "open" jobs that claimed more than 600 people had applied for the position.

[118] Part of this is due to the challenge in maintaining an impressive publication record with a high teaching load, but some of it is likely due to prestige bias. See [this post on the Philosophers' Cocoon for some discussion of the VAP treadmill](). For a more in-depth account of the difficulties – financial, emotional, and otherwise – tied to adjunct and non-tenured positions, see Alex Bradner's "[The Cruelty of the Adjunct System]()."

openings by common words that appear in desired areas of specialization. The results of this process are displayed on this page and the next. As you may gather from the visuals, larger circles represent a larger number of job postings.
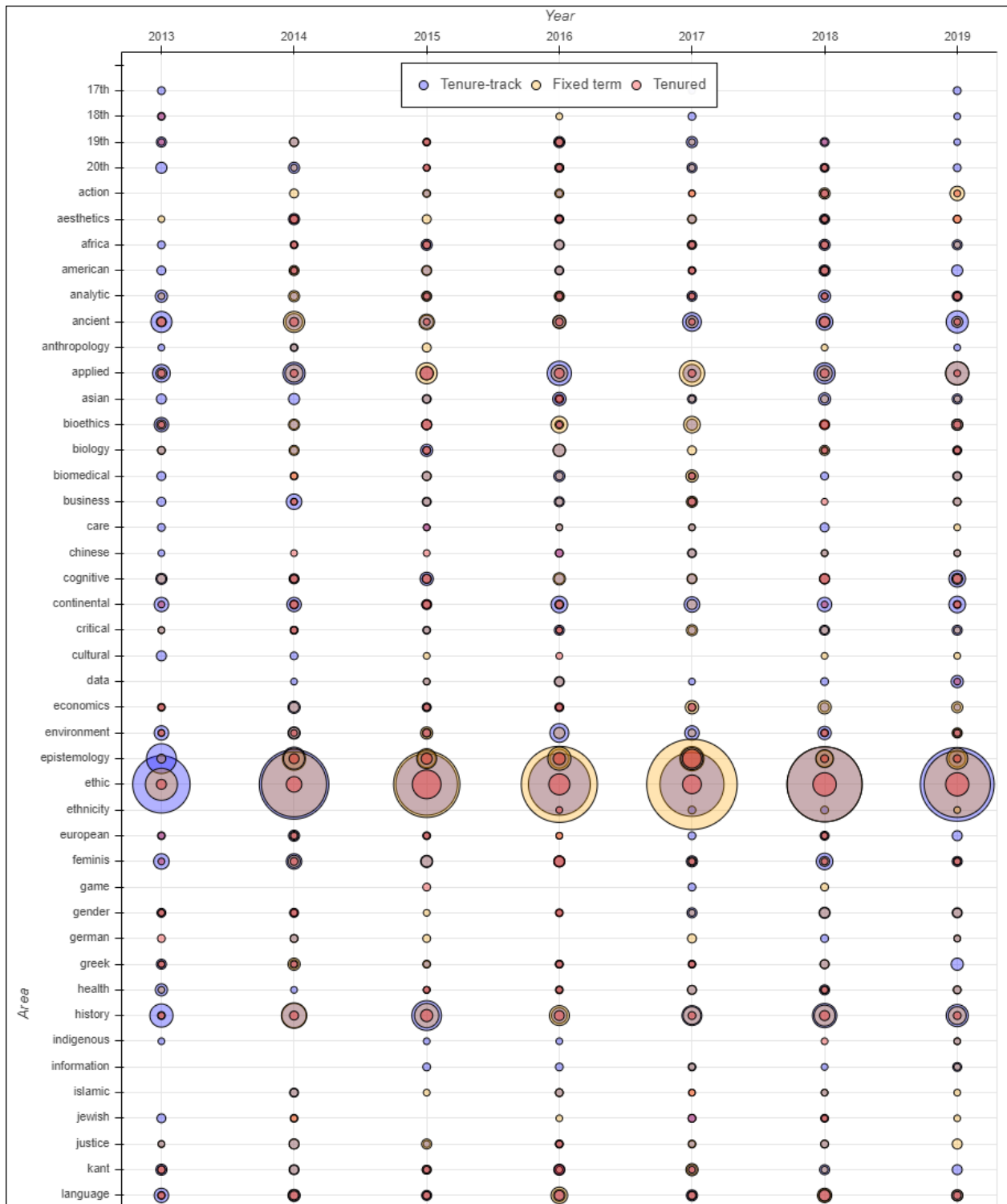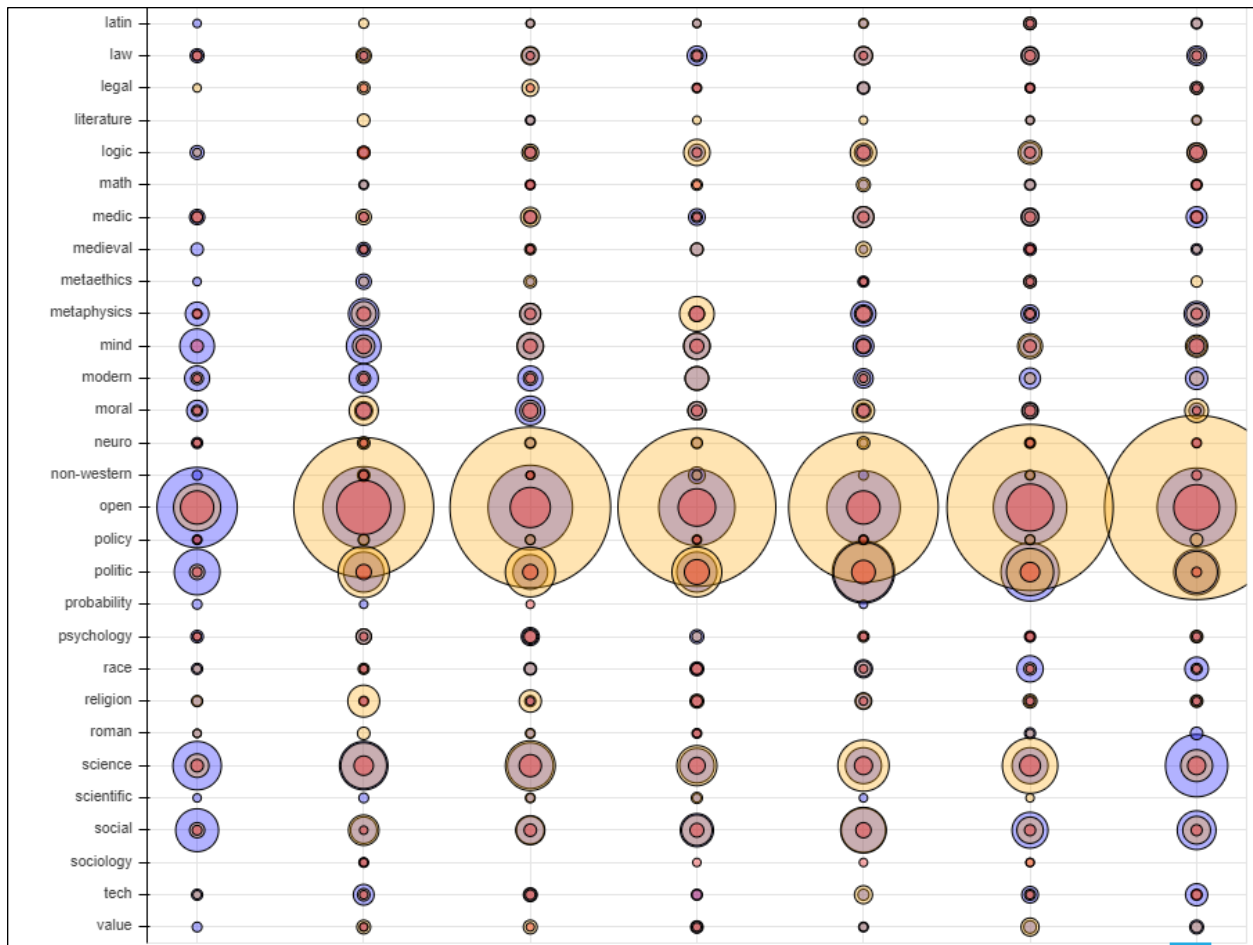
The original graph had some interactive features that allowed viewers to see the precise numbers of each job in each category, but the Aero Data Lab webpage that hosted it is no longer accessible. Fortunately, Dr. Hey shared an archived copy of the original webpage with me at my request. Here are some of his observations about this data:

- There were consistently many (i.e., 100+) fixed-term jobs with an open AOS.
- Jobs in ethics, politics, and philosophy of science were more common than other areas of specialization. Ethics usually had 50+ jobs and the other two categories had 20–30 postings each year.
- Tenure-track jobs in most AOS's fluctuated between 2 and 10 each year.
- During this 7-year sample, there were only a handful of opportunities in philosophy of math, aesthetics, and medieval philosophy each year – even for fixed-term positions.

My impression is that these features of the job market remain true today. (Job postings were far lower than usual in 2020–2021, but that appears to have been a 1-year anomaly caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.) While your AOS should not be determined solely by the number of available jobs in the area, it is certainly a factor to take into consideration.

The Timeline (or Lack Thereof)

Academic philosophy once had a relatively consistent hiring schedule. In North America, the APA would distribute two issues of a newsletter titled "Jobs for Philosophers." The fall issue would list tenure-track job openings, and the spring issue would list available visiting positions and other forms of employment off the tenure track. Interviews for tenure-track positions always took place at the Eastern Division meeting of the APA, which took place in late December. There was also a reception at the APA Eastern (known as "The Smoker") where job candidates could mingle with members of the search committees who interviewed them.

When I began graduate school in 2010, this was the norm: the job market had a fairly rigid structure, and interviews were overwhelmingly in-person events. But by the time I was on the market for the first time in 2016, in-person interviews at the APA Eastern were almost nonexistent. Virtual interviews are cheaper than in-person interviews (for both search committee members and job candidates) and can be scheduled with far greater flexibility. Moreover, the APA Eastern took place in the last week of December – a time of year in which many North American academics do not want to travel. Even before COVID-19 necessitated a massive shift toward virtual events, in-person interviews were going extinct. Nowadays, almost all first-round interviews are conducted over Zoom or similar video-conferencing software (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Adobe Connect).

The improvement to cost and convenience was a win-win for job candidates and search committee members, but it did have one significant side effect that impacts job candidates: the job market ceased to have any uniform schedule. While the American Philosophical Association does have a [short statement with some recommendations for the job market calendar](#), these guidelines are rather minimal and not always followed. Job candidates should expect to begin sending out applications near the beginning of October (at the latest), and it is easily possible that they will still be sending out applications in June.

When you are far enough along on the dissertation to complete it during the upcoming academic year, you should expect to devote at least 6 weeks during the summer to preparing your job market documents. Your materials will take longer to write and revise than you anticipate, and while they do not need to be finalized at the start of the fall term, they should be polished enough that you could apply for the jobs with September deadlines if any appeared in your area of specialization.

How Many Jobs Should You Apply for?

There are three broad strategies for approaching your job market applications:

- The Broad Approach: apply for every job you are qualified for.
- The Narrow Approach: apply for a portion of the jobs you are qualified for based on certain constraints or requirements (e.g., only apply for jobs in a certain geographical area, only apply for jobs at certain types of institutions).

- ▪ The Soft Search: apply only for a small portion of jobs you are qualified for, typically just those that are the most appealing to you.

The only scenario where a Soft Search makes sense for a graduate student is if you are in position to go on the market with 1 year of secured funding still in hand. If you find yourself in this fortuitous position, you can apply for a small number of jobs – perhaps the jobs you want the most among those posted during that application cycle – and return to your graduate program for a final year if you do not land a position. You would also then benefit from having relatively polished job market documents for the more robust search you would conduct the following year. However, if you are in position to do a Soft Search, you might be better off taking that year to work on publishing another paper, earning a pedagogy-focused certification, or otherwise improving your credentials rather than investing time and energy in a restricted job search that is unlikely to yield results. In such a situation, you will have to use your own judgment about what best serves your long-term interests.

For those not doing a Soft Search, it is difficult to identify which of the other approaches is best because they both have plausible rationales behind them. The main reason to favor the Broad Approach is that luck plays a significant role in how candidates are evaluated. Furthermore, because there are so many applicants for these jobs, the odds of any specific job ending in an offer to you is extremely low. Thus, you want to give yourself as many chances on the job market as possible. If the job is in your AOS or a closely related area, you should apply for it.[119]

The reasoning behind the Broad Approach may sound compelling, but there are some additional factors to consider. One is that it takes time and energy to complete applications, and applying to as many jobs as possible may not allow you to tailor your applications in ways that make them as strong as they could be. Another is that you may not be willing to accept certain types of jobs: they might be located further away than you are willing to move or not fit your preferred balance of research and teaching. These considerations lead some to adopt a Narrow Approach where they apply to a smaller number of jobs but (usually) spend more time polishing and refining the applications that they submit to those jobs – namely, by tailoring cover letters and other application documents.

I cannot offer a recommendation about which of these strategies to use. Both can work and both can fail. During my first job search (2016–2017), I adopted a Broad Approach and applied for 90 jobs. I would have applied for significantly more, but I got a job offer in February and accepted it. During my next major job search (2018–2019),[120] I adopted a Broad Approach again and applied for 118 jobs. I would not have applied for any more even if no offers had emerged. I

---

[119] I will briefly note here that even on the broadest of approaches to the job market, you should not apply for jobs that are clearly outside your AOS. Such attempts are waste of time and destined to end in failure. Focus your energies on the applications for jobs that are a reasonable match for your credentials and expertise.

[120] During 2017–2018, I attempted a Soft Search and only sent out 19 applications – all of them to tenure-track positions. I was in the first year of a 2-year postdoc, so this was mostly just a probe to see if I could land a really desirable permanent position. This search yielded one interview but nothing further.

ultimately accepted an offer in late May for the 118th job I had applied for.[121] That job search was so grueling and tumultuous that I vowed to apply for fewer jobs the next time. During my most research search (2021–2022), I planned to apply for 60 jobs but got a job offer a few applications short of hitting that mark. I adopted a Narrow Approach and screened out postdocs and 1-year jobs: I was too far past attaining my PhD to be eligible for virtually any postdocs, and I was not willing to relocate somewhere just to be back on the job market immediately.

I know some who applied more widely than I did – sometimes to more than 200 positions – and landed an amazing position at the end of their searches. I also know people who applied more narrowly than I ever did – sometimes in the ballpark of 30–40 positions – and also ended up with an excellent position at the end of their process. Given the low odds of securing any position (no matter how strong your application), I would recommend applying for at least 60 jobs if you can – in some AOSs, it may be hard to reach that threshold. But you will have to use your own judgment regarding how many applications you want to submit beyond that number.

Preparing Materials

Almost all job applications will require some combination of the following documents:

- A cover letter
- Your current curriculum vitae (CV)
- Three letters of recommendation
- A research statement
- A writing sample
- A teaching statement
- A summary of recent student evaluations of your teaching, often supplemented by the full evaluations from a couple of your recent courses

Sometimes, you will also be asked to provide some of these items:

- Graduate transcripts
- A diversity statement
- Sample syllabi
- An idiosyncratic research or teaching statement made specifically for that application

Occasionally, you will be asked to consolidate the various teaching-related documents listed above into a teaching portfolio. This portfolio should, at a minimum, be paginated and include a table of contents that directs readers to the items you have chosen to include.

Unfortunately, while I will offer some general guidelines one preparing your materials, I cannot walk you through the creation and assimilation of all of these documents step by step. There are two reasons for this. First, the content of most of these documents is going to depend in large part of your actual accomplishments and profile. Your research statement will focus primarily on

---

[121] I documented that search thoroughly in [this blog post on the Philosophers' Cocoon](#).

your choice of dissertation topic and your central areas of specialization, for example. Second, there is significant disagreement among professional philosophers about how some of these documents should be crafted. Let me illustrate that point by using cover letters as a concrete example.

I have spent dozens of hours reading about the best practices for crafting cover letters and submitted hundreds of them as part of job application packets. Yet I could not find any consensus about even some of the most basic questions about these documents. For example, should a cover letter be 1 or 2 pages (using standard business letter formatting)? Some will advocate that it be condensed to a single page. The second page, they might reason, is unlikely to be read at all. Others will advocate that cover letters should be more substantial than just a single page. After all, they are an opportunity to sell yourself to the hiring committee, and you shouldn't pass up that opportunity. A third group would say it doesn't make any difference how long your cover letter is because they don't even read cover letters in their department. There are similar disagreements about whether a person should engage in self-aggrandizement in cover letters and how they might do it. People also disagree about the extent to which cover letters should be tailored to fit the institution.

Herein lies an important observation about your application materials – one that has been well captured in one of Allen Wood's posts on the APA Blog about applying for academic jobs in philosophy. Woods says that he advises keeping cover letters short because they are unlikely to be read carefully if they are more than a few paragraphs. But then he adds the following caveat:

> [R]emember that what I'm doing here is describing my own practices. I've been told that for some readers of dossiers, especially *not* at research universities, the letter of application is the most important thing of all. If it is too short, the applicant has little chance with such readers. I suppose the moral of the story is that what will help you at one place will hurt you at another, and you often have no way of knowing which is which. (Welcome to the job market.)

This is one of the cruel realities of the job market in philosophy: due to the variance in who will read your application materials and how they will evaluate them, it will not be possible to cater to everyone's preferences. You have to pick an approach toward crafting your materials and just do the best you can within that approach.

Ultimately, I followed advice in crafting cover letters similar to what Allen Wood advises, but I created more detailed and tailored cover letters under two conditions – (1) if the job ad specifically mentioned something that it wanted addressed in the cover letter and (2) if I had a unique qualification that would make me a particularly good match for the position. I don't know whether this is the optimal approach, but I received enough first-round interviews that it was clear my cover letters were often not eliminating me from contention.

On the bright side, there are some aspects of creating these job market materials where a fairly broad consensus does exist. I've already discussed cover letters a bit, but I will briefly highlight a

few of their general features before continuing. The I'll offer a short description of the additional application items and a few pointers on strengthening them.

Cover Letters

All cover letters should contain a formal greeting, a summary of the position you are applying to, a description of your current research, a description of your relevant teaching experience and interests, and a formal closing with a signature. Thus, it is possible to reduce a cover letter to a formula that looks like this:

- Header with date, department mailing address, etc. (4–6 lines)
- Greeting (1 line)
- Opening statement / description of job you are applying for (2–3 lines)
- Description of research (1 paragraph)
- Description of teaching (1 paragraph)
- Description of job-specific information (1–2 paragraphs; optional)
- Closing statements (2–3 lines)
- Signature

Most of the time, it will be possible to write a suitable cover letter that is a single page in length. As discussed previously, there is disagreement about whether you should include more information and how much you should tailor your letter for each job. However, some job ads will explicitly ask that you mention something specific (e.g., the experience you have relative to a postdoc initiative, experience you have teaching students of a particular background). In those cases, it is a near certainty that your cover letter will be heavily scrutinized, and you should tailor its content appropriately if you want to be competitive for that position.

The format I sketched above assumes that you are applying for a research job, but for teaching-focused jobs, it is usually a good idea to switch the teaching and research descriptions so that your teaching is the first substantive thing you mention in the letter. For jobs where research and teaching appear roughly equal in importance, lead with whatever part of your profile is strongest. These cover letters are often only skimmed, so you want the first thing a committee member reads to be something that leaves a strong positive impression.

On the theme of making a positive first impression, I recommend using your official department / university letterhead if possible. It will make your cover letter look much more professional. You should be able to find these letterheads (along with a template for MS Word and similar programs) somewhere on your university website. If you cannot locate this material, ask your department's administrative staff for assistance.

CV

Hopefully, as you have inched closer to the job market, you have been periodically updating your CV. It will almost surely be one of the first items read by committee members, and it is one

of the most important. Your biggest accomplishments should be clearly visible on the first page, and the document as a whole should be organized using a clear and consistent scheme. If you are including a brief dissertation summary on your first page, make sure it is succinct enough not to make your other accomplishments less noticeable, particularly if you have a strong publication record. If you're looking for a way to model a good CV, browse some well-known philosophers online and find a CV format that presents the material clearly and professionally.[122] Then mimic that style. Don't be tempted to use any odd fonts or avant-garde formatting: they might make your material more noticeable, but you want your application to stand out because of its impressive content rather than because of its bizarre appearance. Almost all CVs will use 12-point font, though some elect to make the font of their section headings slightly larger.

Before we go further, here is one obvious but important rule to remember when preparing *all* of your application materials:

> **Honesty Rule**: Do not intentionally present false or misleading information on any of your application materials.

There are two reasons for abiding by this rule. First, there are moral considerations. It is generally wrong to engage in acts of deception, and absent the outlandish thought experiments of philosophers with too much time on their hands, there will rarely be anything special about applying for a job that would warrant an exception to this general moral rule. Second, there are practical considerations. These acts of deception are likely to be detected – either upon initial review or later in the process – and getting caught trying to deceive the committee is a surefire way to sink your chances for that particular job. Furthermore, since the philosophical world is small and people talk, there is a decent chance that being caught in this lie will follow you to other job applications. Here are a few deceptive practices on CVs that should be avoided:

- Do not list AOSs and AOCs that you do not really have.
- Do not list papers <u>under review</u> as publications. They are <u>not publications</u>. Only papers that have been accepted for publication should be listed as publications.
- Do not lie about the projected date of your dissertation defense. (Your dissertation advisor is the one who should speak about the projected defense date anyway; they should mention it in their letter of recommendation.)
- Do not list all your publications in one section and title it "Selected Publications." This creates the impression that you have more publications than you actually do.

---

[122] If you want a more elaborate list of a CV's typical content and organization, see this post by Lewis Powell. Note, however (as Powell does), that in many respects there are no agreed-upon rules regarding how CVs are formatted and organized. A large aspect of that will be left to your discretion.

- ▪ Do not present campus talks (e.g., a presentation delivered to the undergraduate philosophy club at your institution) as if they were equivalent to presentations at professional conferences or invited talks at other universities.[123]

Beyond these rules about avoiding deception, there are two other important things to keep in mind about the content of your CV. First, do not list anything from prior to graduate school except for information about your undergraduate degree and where you received it. This material will look like CV padding and is mostly irrelevant to your professional credentials now. The lone exception might be a truly distinguished undergraduate award (e.g., Rhodes scholar) that would be impressive even though it was achieved at the undergraduate level.

Second, your CV should be constructed so that every major strength of your professional profile appears within the first two pages. Your CV may be much longer, but whatever your biggest strengths are, they need to come across clearly in the first two pages. If a committee member is not impressed on the first or second page, it is doubtful they will read further: since there could be hundreds of job applicants for their vacant position, you should expect little time to be spent reviewing the fine-grained details of your materials at the initial review stage.

The importance of the first two pages also provides a reason to avoid using excessive white space or unusual formatting to artificially extend the length of your CV. Some philosophers use unnecessary indentions and line breaks to make a single list item take up 3 or 4 lines when it could be clearly stated in just 1 or 2. Even if this does not come across as CV padding (which it might to some readers), it can still result in pushing important information onto page 3 when that material could have been on page 2 instead.

Placing your greatest strengths early in your CV could require reorganizing your credentials from how they would normally be formatted. The standard order puts your education, areas of specialization and competence, and employment history first (though you may not have any employment history beyond your GTA experience). After these items, publications and other research-related material typically follows. But if you have a ton of solo teaching experience and are targeting teaching-focused jobs, make sure your courses taught are prominently featured and cleanly presented within the first two pages. Do not bury that information near the end of your CV where it may never be read. To offer a different example, when I was preparing for the job market, I opted to push my dissertation abstract to the very back of my dissertation so I could list all my publications on the first page of my CV. No matter how concise I made the summary, it still pushed a few of my publications onto page 2. My publications were my strongest selling point, so I wanted them all on the first page.

Regardless of your formatting scheme, some items should virtually always be near the back of your CV. Your graduate coursework, reference information, and university service should not be

---

[123] Note that there is some disagreement about whether "job talks" – presentations delivered to a department who is considering whether or not to hire you – should be listed on a CV. See this post on the Philosophers' Cocoon for some discussion of that issue.

near the front of your CV. Even if your service work is impressive (e.g., president of graduate student senate), these details can be mentioned in your cover letter if you think they are worth highlighting or particularly relevant to the job. Typically, service will not be noteworthy enough to leave a big impression on search committees.

Letters of Recommendation

There are some signifiant concerns about whether soliciting letters of recommendation for jobs is appropriate.[124] The epistemic value of these letters is questionable since letter writers often heap exaggerated praise on the person they are writing for, and in some cases, applicants draft their own letters of recommendation and simply have their "writer" provide a signature.[125] The practice of writing your own letter of recommendation and then just getting a signature from someone else strikes me as deceptive and unethical, but it happens nevertheless.[126] Even so, the practice of soliciting letters of recommendation is unlikely to change any time soon. As your graduate career progresses, you will want to keep in mind what faculty members in your department could serve as letter writers for you down the road.

Most job applications will require three letters of recommendation, and often you will be instructed not to upload more. However, because of the variance in types of jobs, you will probably want more than three letters on hand. One of your letters should be written by your dissertation advisor, and at least one letter should be written by someone who is familiar with your teaching. You may also want a letter writer who can speak to your main AOC that lies outside your AOS. Such a letter can be handy if you apply for a job where having that particular AOC is important.[127] It's also not a bad idea to have letter writer other than your dissertation advisor who can speak to your competence in your main AOS.

Be sure to explicitly request that your dissertation advisor mention your scheduled defense date. If you have not established a scheduled defense date, then settle on one. You can adjust this date later if needed, but it is important that there is a planned completion date that your advisor can mention. One of the biggest concerns that hiring committees have about ABD graduate students

---

[124] For more in-depth discussion of these concerns, see Michael Huemer's "What's Wrong with Soliciting Letters of Recommendation?", Helen De Cruz's "Three Reasons Why We Should Not Request Letters of Recommendation for Job Applications", Allison Vailllancourt and Özlem Ersin's "Is It Time to Eliminate Recommendation Letters? (Hint: Yes)", and Benjamin Schreier's "No More Letters of Recommendation!"

[125] This is especially common outside the Anglosphere – where letters of recommendation carry far less weight in the evaluation of applications. See this discussion about the matter on The Philosophers Cocoon.

[126] I realize that some graduate students feel forced to engage in this practice because their advisor will not write the letter themselves, but if you are in that position, I encourage you not to concede so easily. Ask for letters early (so that your letter writers have plenty of time to produce their drafts), and if they persist in making you do their work for them, bring the issue to other members of your department. Offloading the letter-writing process to graduate students undercuts the purpose of letters of recommendation and only further increases graduate students' workload. For those reasons, this practice should be opposed.

[127] As an example, one of my letter writers during my first few years on the market wrote primarily about my work in epistemology. My main AOS is applied ethics, but I thought a letter from this person would be useful for jobs where one of the desired AOCs was epistemology.

is a fear that they will not complete their dissertation on time.[128] To the extent possible, you need to nullify that concern, and a confident statement from your advisor that you will finish by a set date is the best way to accomplish this. If your advisor can say something specific (e.g., "Bob is 80% of the way finished with his dissertation"), request that they include that information as well. It is also a good idea to list your scheduled defense date on your CV and make sure it conforms to what your advisor has stated. Importantly, this defense date needs to be feasible because you may be asked about it during the job interview (and some job interviews may take place after your scheduled defense date). You do not want to be in position where you must admit you are not on track to defend as scheduled or where you are tempted to lie about your progress.

If possible, try to secure a letter from someone outside your home institution. This is generally less important for graduate students than others on the job market: those on admissions committees will recognize that you have fewer opportunities to form substantive relationships with philosophers outside your home department than, say, someone who has held multiple visiting positions. Even so, letters from people at other institutions are often perceived as less biased because those at other institutions do not have the same incentives to see you succeed as your advisor and the others in your home department. So it's worth securing a strong letter from someone outside your department if you can.

Ideally, you will have 4 or 5 quality letters that can be arranged in various combinations to suit both teaching and research positions. Having more letters at your disposal is not a bad thing, but I do not think it is necessary. Many application systems are now designed to only allow for three letters to be uploaded, and if you submit more letters than a search committee asks for, those additional letters will probably not be read. Moreover, a letter that is significantly weaker than the others can actually hurt your chances compared to if you didn't include it.

When it comes to submitting your letters, you will want to use a dossier delivery service. Interfolio is by far the most popular choice for academic job applications, and some jobs will even require you to submit your entire application through this service. After creating an account, you will send your letter writers a link to upload their confidential letters of recommendation. After they upload their letters to Interfolio, you can use a link to specific Interfolio-based email addresses associated with your application when filling out contact information for your references in the hiring institution's HR system. When you submit your application, requests will be sent to someone at Interfolio to upload a letter on your behalf, and they will do so within 24–48 hours.[129] They will know which letter to upload based on the email addresses associated with the individual uploads made by each of your letter writers.

---

[128] See, for instance, this discussion about the issue.

[129] I have used Interfolio for hundreds of job applications, and I do not recall it ever taking longer than 48 hours. Usually, the letters are uploaded in under 24 hours.

Interfolio is not free, but it is not too expensive, either – even for a graduate student.[130] If the price is still too high for you to afford, ask for a little money from your graduate program – there should be enough available to help you apply for jobs.[131] An Interfolio subscription is definitely worth getting because it provides two big advantages. First, it maintains the confidentiality of your letters through the submission process Second, it allows you reliable control of when those letters are submitted as part of your application. It is possible to have your letter writers upload their letters themselves (assuming they agree to this), but they will all need to be monitoring their email carefully and looking for individual letter upload requests from many different HR systems. Some professors are willing to do that and can do so reliably, but it is a signifciant amount of extra work for them and increases the chance of error or delay. Beyond being more reliable, Interfolio can also send you notifications about when letter upload requests are received and when they are submitted, so you can make sure that eveything is on track. For these reasons, I consider an Interfolio account and subscription an essential aspect of job market preparation.

Research Statement

The content of your research statement depends almost entirely on your dissertation topic, main areas of interest, and long-term plans for your individual research. Thus, my advice here will be succinct and general. Most research statements written by ABD graduate students will have 3 main features presented in the following order:

1. A general statement about what main themes, issues, or ideas unify your research as a whole
2. A description of your current research – that is, your dissertation
3. A plan for your research over the next few years

There are rarely any compelling reasons to deviate from this structure. The content itself will provide the relevant variation from the other applicants. Determining what to describe and emphasize can be difficult, though. You want to convey the significance of your work – how it will advance scholarship in the area – without your presentation coming across as exaggerated or self-aggrandizing. You also want to avoid technical jargon since many who read your research statement will not work in your area.[132] Finally, you want to convey in your research statement that you have a plan for publishing material that will help you earn tenure or promotion.[133] Hence, the last part of your research statement should at least gesture at work you will do after

---

[130] Dossier Deliver costs $59.99 for 50 deliveries. One delivery can include several letters if they are all going to the same place, and deliveries to Interfolio-hosted applications do not count toward your total. You can also purchase additional deliveries if you need them.

[131] In the era of offline job applications, there was often money available to help cover the postage costs of mailing all the application materials, and that was much more expensive than an Interfolio subscription.

[132] This is especially true at institutions with smaller philosophy departments where multiple committee members are outside your area of specialization and for interdisciplinary positions where several search committee members may have PhDs in fields other than philosophy.

[133] For jobs where research is not important to tenure or promotion, it is unlikely that a research statement will be requested as part of the application materials.

you have completed your dissertation even if your remarks in this regard are somewhat speculative.

The best strategy for developing your research statement is to write it with heavy input from your dissertation advisor – the person who is most likely to be familiar with your current work and its significance. I also advise having it read and critiqued by at least one faculty member who works outside your area of specialization. That will give you a clearer idea of how accessible the statement is to a non-specialist and what might need to be changed.

Research statements can be longer than 1 single-spaced page, but I recommend capping them at 2 single-spaced pages. As with the prior documents, there is no guarantee anyone will read beyond the first page. For that reason, put the most impactful content on the first page.

Teaching Statement

The content of your teaching statement will depend significantly on your own approach to pedagogy, but here are a few general recommendations for writing it:

- Make it clear what you want to accomplish when you teach. Communicate what you want students to learn and why those things are important to you.
- Show; don't tell. Never merely assert that you are passionate about teaching or that you care about your students. It is certainly good if these things are true, but you need to illustrate these claims with examples. What do you do in the classroom or in your course design that reflects passion for teaching or concern for your students? That's what the committee members really want to know.
- Demonstrate that you have pedagogical expertise. Justify your pedagogical practices with evidence that they work or explanations of how you altered past teaching techniques in response to things you learned. If you have obtained pedagogical certifications or attended teaching workshops, mention these and highlight one of the most important things you learned while obtaining them that helped you improve your teaching.
- Demonstrate your innovativeness and creativity. A lot of philosophical instruction remains relatively antiquated: instructors present material and pose some questions to the class, some discussion happens, and then the cycle repeats. If done well, that can be effective, but hopefully, you have some more nuanced pedagogical techniques to showcase in your statement. What other strategies to you use to promote active learning in your classroom, and what makes them effective? Pick some of the coolest things you do in the classroom for your examples; don't just communicate that you use the same techniques as everyone else.
- Keep it short. Your teaching statement should not go beyond one single-spaced page. Be clear, and be concise.

For feedback on your teaching statement, consult the person who is writing your teaching-focused letter of recommendation. This person should be the faculty member most familiar with your teaching and thus the one most likely to provide meaningful advice about how you can

present your strengths as an instructor. Additionally, you want that professor's letter of recommendation to reinforce what you say in your statement.

Teaching Portfolio

Hiring Committees will sometimes request that you bundle an array of teaching documents into a single portfolio. Ideally, they will tell you what documents to include, but not all job ads provide this information. Here are the standard ingredients in a teaching portfolio:

- Your teaching statement
- A summary overview of your student evaluations for the last several years
- Complete student evaluations for at least two recent courses
- At least one complete course syllabus, usually for a class relevant to the job ad
- Course proposals or outlines for classes you would might teach if hired
- Copies of any pedagogy-related certifications you have received

I also recommend including a table of contents on the first page so that committee members know what is in the portfolio and where they can find it. Echoing a theme with your job market application materials, there is no guarantee that they will read everything in your portfolio.

Some philosophers provide only "selected" comments from their course evaluations. I think this is a bad idea. Removing comments from your teaching evaluations creates the impression that you are hiding something or that your materials are not authentic. You do not want to give that impression: include all the comments from your evaluations, and do not alter them.

Another practice I oppose is including letters of support from undergraduate students. It is great if you have students who are willing to support you, but undergrads are not pedagogical experts. They cannot assess the quality of your teaching, and committee members will not take these letters seriously. The person who should vouch for the quality of your teaching is the faculty member writing your teaching letter.

Diversity Statement[134]

Diversity statements were a relatively rare request when I first went on the job market in Fall 2016, but they have become more common in recent years.[135] If I had to make an estimate, I would guess that 25–30% of applications required them in the 2021–2022 job cycle (which is the last time I was on the job market). Speaking in broad terms, diversity statements are a summary of your views about diversity and inclusiveness and an illustration of how you promote diversity

---

[134] For the content of this section, I am deeply indebted to Michael Blake for discussion and extended correspondence about what separates effective diversity statements from ineffective ones.

[135] I will admit that I am not sure whether that will continue to be the case in the United States. A recent ruling by the Supreme Court has severely limited the extent to which race can be used as a factor in college admissions. This ruling could have ripple effects that impact hiring practices (e.g., because universities want to avoid potential lawsuits), and future rulings by the Supreme Court might explicitly extend to hiring practices in higher education.

and inclusiveness in your teaching, service, and scholarship. They are among the trickiest job documents to write.

The temptation with diversity statements is to provide a vague platitude about what diversity is and then just list the various committees or personal experiences you have that are relevant to promoting diversity in an academic context. That is not a terrible strategy to get you started, but it cannot be where you end. Here are some of the problems with most diversity statements:

- Lack of reflection on what makes diversity and inclusiveness valuable. Diversity statements are an opportunity to demonstrate that you have thought seriously about why diversity and inclusiveness are important values in the context of higher education. Do not assume that committee members all have the same view on the value of diversity and inclusion or that they have an intuitive understanding of your view on these matters. Make it explicit what your position is.
- Excessive credentialing. Too many diversity statements are little more than a list of committee work and personal anecdotes. It can be a good thing to include this material, but you must convey why it matters, what you learned from it, and how it connects to your overall understanding of diversity and inclusiveness.
- An overemphasis on personal challenges. If you are a member of a minority group, your experiences as a member of that group could play a role in the narrative your diversity statement conveys, but listing the many ways you were wronged, disadvantaged, and oppressed risk coming across as whiny or pity-seeking. What you want to do is connect these personal experiences to your scholarship, your teaching practices, or aspects of your service work. Explain how your experiences impacted what you do in these areas of your professional life.
- No mention of future plans related to diversity and inclusiveness. Some institutions do not just want a summary of what you have done; they also want to know what you plan to do in the future with regard to diversity and inclusion.[136] Make sure you include a brief mention of how you expect to promote diversity, inclusiveness, and related values in your ongoing teaching, future scholarship, or expected service work.

Like the other statements, diversity statements should be read and evaluated by those familiar with your overall candidate profile. You want what you say on your diversity statement to be consistent with the other parts of your application. For example, if you mention creating an inclusive classroom as important to you in your diversity statement, it would be strange if there were no examples of how you do that in your teaching statement.

Before moving on to the writing sample, I should address a notable concern that often emerges in discussions of diversity statements. Some believe that diversity and inclusion per se are not actually valuable or that diversity statements are really just a means of imposing ideological

---

[136] The sample rubric that UC Berkley offers to evaluate diversity statements lists future plans related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging as one of only two evaluative criteria.

conformity on job applicants.[137] If you hold such views and still want to apply for positions that require diversity statements, then you should avoid making these kinds of claims. If an institution is requiring you to speak to the value of diversity and inclusiveness in your application, then it is a safe bet that most people at that institution value those things. If you make it clear that you do not hold those views, you will probably be eliminated from consideration on those grounds.

This situation poses a potential conflict with the Honesty Rule. Applicants may feel they cannot complete a diversity statement truthfully without eliminating themselves from consideration for the job. Usually, however, that is a false dilemma. I suspect that almost all applicants can find some value that is connected to diversity and inclusiveness that they consider important and anchor their diversity statement around that concept. It is now commonplace to include concepts like equity and belongingness in the discourse around diversity and inclusion, for instance. One could also engage in a discussion of fairness and justice in the context of higher education. Such an approach may require creative framing, but it should not require lying.

If it really is the case that you cannot complete a diversity statement honestly (even using the strategy I sketched above), then you may be better off not applying for the position: when a diversity statement is requested, hiring committees will usually also ask about these matters at the interview stage. If there is a campus visit as part of the process, it is also a safe bet that university administrators will ask about these matters. Maintaining the impression that you care about diversity and inclusiveness when you in fact do not is unlikely to succeed at the various different stages of the search. Should your deception somehow succeed, you may also be forced to do service and committee work that does not align with your values once you start the job.

Writing Sample

Your writing sample should be your best philosophical work. This could be an edited dissertation chapter, a published paper, or an in-progress paper. Whichever you pick, let me reiterate: it should be your best philosophical work. Ideally, this is a paper of 20–25 double-spaced pages in your AOS that makes a novel contribution to the literature, clearly presents your position and main arguments, and addresses objections effectively. It is also critical that your writing sample be engaging from the first sentence. Writing samples are long and require a significant time investment to read in full.[138] If you don't hold the reader's interest for the first page, they are likely not going to read the rest. Remember that they're looking for reasons to discard your dossier – if you have a writing sample that doesn't interest them, then a swift rejection is all but guaranteed.

Writing has already been covered extensively in Part 5 and Part 6. I am not going to rehash all those suggestions here. The same guidelines for producing publishable work apply to your writing sample. In fact, if you have a recently published journal article in your AOS, that is

---

[137] For some examples, see this discussion from 2023 on Daily Nous.

[138] For this reason, writing samples are usually not read until relatively late in the review process – likely after a hundred or more candidates have been eliminated from contention for the position.

probably what you should use. If you use a polished dissertation chapter instead, then it needs to be just as polished as publishable work if it is to serve as a suitable writing sample.

Job Market Consultants

Before discussing the application process itself, I should address one final question you might have: should you use a job market consultant to help you improve your materials? I have never used one, but I know some people who believe doing so is a good investment of their time and money. One of the more prominent people this discussion is [Karen Kelsky](), author of *[The Professor Is In]()* and founder of the consulting service that bears the same name. Unfortunately, reports from some of the people who have used her services suggest that they are not as worthwhile nowadays as they may once have been.[139]

I'll just offer two short thoughts on using job market consultants. First, you should only be considering these if the faculty members in your department – most notably your advisor and your department's placement director – are not giving you the advice and mentorship that you need. Sadly, there are departments that fit this description, and if you feel truly lost when it comes to drafting your statements and cover letter, then hiring an academic consultant might be worth doing.

Yet, even when your department does a poor job of supporting ABDs going onto the job market, I would be wary of hiring a job market consultant because of my second thought: most of the information you will be told by job market consultants can be found elsewhere for free or at a fraction of the cost. As one illustration, Kelsky's book *The Professor Is In* can be purchased brand new for about $15, but the prices of her individual consulting services are dramatically higher. Here were a few of her services and their corresponding prices as of 2024 (obtained via browsing various pages on [her website]()):

- CV review: $180–$250
- Teaching statement review: $180–$250
- Research proposal review: $360–$648
- Dissertation abstract review: $180
- Job Talk Review: $460–$540
- Interview intervention (50-minute Zoom session): $250–$300

These prices strike me as outrageous, particularly since graduate students have so little disposable income. Even if unintentional, this creates the impression of an attempt to exploit their fear and desperation for profit. If I were advising a graduate student, I cannot imagine advising them to spend this sum of money for what these services entail. If you need advice, you

---

[139] For some examples, see [this thread on the psychjobswiki](), [this thread on reddit](), or [this more recent thread on reddit](). The recurring criticisms in these threads suggest that her advice is often too discipline-specific to generalize, that the advice offered usually just repeats material found in her book, that her services are often too expensive relative to the improvements that result from them, and that she is unfriendly.

will be better served by reaching out to other members of the philosophical community who have been successful on the job market, especially recent graduates from your program.

All that said, I did purchase Kelsky's book as a graduate student and found some of her advice useful. You may find some valuable insights in it that help you refine your materials. But you don't need to pay her $180 to tell you how to format your CV: look at some CVs from philosophers who have been successful on the job market recently and save your money.

The Application Process

Once your materials are prepped, you can start submitting applications. The first step in that process is finding available jobs. There are job boards online that list available positions. Here are some of the major ones:

- PhilJobs: https://philjobs.org/
- HigherEdJobs: https://www.higheredjobs.com/
- Inside Higher Ed: https://careers.insidehighered.com/
- The Chronicle of Higher Education: https://jobs.chronicle.com/
- CommunityCollegeJobs: https://www.communitycollegejobs.com/

PhilJobs is tailored to jobs in philosophy; the others list academic jobs across many different disciplines, so you will have to filter the results to find appropriate job openings. While the postings on job boards often overlap, there are also some significant differences between them. One of the most notable is that jobs at community colleges, SLACS, and other smaller institutions often do not appear on PhilJobs. If you are not monitoring the other job boards, then you will miss most of these posts. Jobs also get posted to these boards at different times: sometimes, a job appears in one venue a month before its deadline on one job board but only shows up a week before the deadline on a different one. You may also consider subscribing to listservs in your subfield and searching for jobs in other forums where they might be posted, such as LinkenIn.

Your best strategy for keeping up with what's available is to habitually check the relevant job boards and whatever other resources you are using. While on the job market, I recommend scheduling an hour into your workweek to scan for new postings once or twice. It is not necessary to check for new job postings every day, but check at least once a week.

When you identify a job that you want to apply for, save that information into a document that lists all your jobs of interest for that application cycle. I used a Google Sheet for this task, but any spreadsheet is suitable. You could also embed a table into a Word document, though this may not provide as many tools when it comes to sorting or resorting this information.[140] Label columns with descriptors like "Institution," "Position," "Deadline," and "Website." If you want,

---

[140] Being able to auto-sort the information by deadline date is particularly useful as your list expands, which is why I prefer using a spreadsheet for this task.

you can create other columns and add more information about the job post. Here is a sample with information extracted from one of my job searches.

Institution	Position	AOS / AOC	Website	Deadline	Notes	Done?
Mount St Mary's	Asst Prof	Open	https://philjobs.org/job/	10/15/2021		X
Brandeis	Asst Prof	Open	https://philjobs.org/job/	10/15/2021	Requires diversity statement; ac	✓
Princeton	Asst Prof	Ethics	https://philjobs.org/job/	10/15/2021		✓
Worcester State	Asst Prof	Applied Ethics	https://philjobs.org/job/	10/15/2021	Cover Letter Requires Substanti	✓
Harvard	Asst Prof	Ethics	https://philjobs.org/job/	10/15/2021		✓
Santa Clara	Asst Prof	Business Ethics	https://philjobs.org/job/	10/15/2021	Requires too much tailoring	X
Pennsylvania	Asst Prof	Bioethics	https://careers.insidehi	10/15/2021	Don't fit food systems AOS	X
Virginia	Open Rank	Business Ethics	https://careers.insidehi	10/3/2021	Too much extra tailoring	X
Oakland Univers	Asst Prof	Bioethics	https://philjobs.org/job/	10/1/2021		✓
Georgetown	Asst Prof	Business Ethics	https://apply.interfolio.c	10/1/2021	Interfolio; not a permanent positi	X

Checkmarks in the "Done?" column indicate that I submitted an application; X's in that column indicate that I chose not to apply for the position. Just because you put a job into your spreadsheet does not mean that you must apply to it. Sometimes you will learn on closer inspection that you are not as good a fit for the job as you thought or that the application requirements would be overly burdensome. As my notes in this sample indicate, there were some jobs where I felt the amount of tailoring my application materials would require was too demanding and elected to use my time and energy to focus on other applications.

Almost every application will require a cover letter, and even if you do minimal tailoring, you will still need to change the mailing address and the description of the job you are applying to. Beyond this, there will also be some job ads that request you to create customized documents just for that application. The most common example of this is when a specialized research statement must accompany an application for a postdoctoral position. Many of these jobs are tied to a specific focus or theme, and you will need to alter your research statement to explain how your future work would fit with that theme. The most common other kind of customization that may be requested involves answering specific questions or addressing specific topics in your cover letter or teaching statement.

These customized documents can require a lot of extra work. Naturally, this means that applying for these jobs will take longer than applying for other jobs. However, this may also result in fewer people applying for the position, and it provides you a unique opportunity to stand out from other applications if your customized documents are particularly strong.

The actual process of completing a job application varies depending on the platform. If a job is hosted on Interfolio, you can typically import some of your account information, upload your documents, and have the whole process complete in 5 minutes. Unfortunately, many applications will require you to navigate a university's internal application system. After entering your biographical information, you will eventually come to the page where you upload your CV and other documents. Sometimes, however, there are not enough upload slots for all of the

documents that you have to submit. In that case, you need to use a program like Adobe Acrobat or a website like ilovepdf.com to merge your pdfs together before you can upload them.[141] Once you have uploaded all your documents, you will usually come to a page where you specify the contact information for your letter writers. If you are using a dossier service like Interfolio, you will use the email address associated with their letters on Interfolio rather than their institutional email address. You will usually then need to specify whether you have a disability or are a veteran. After an optional request for your demographic information, you will need to sign and date the last page, and then your application will be complete.

Once you have submitted an application, make it as "done" or "submitted" on your spreadsheet where you are keeping track of all the advertised jobs of interest to you. Then move onto the next one on your list and repeat this process.

Interviews

Almost all job searches will involve a first-round interview with a small group of candidates (usually 8–12 in total), [142] and almost all first-round interviews are now conducted using Zoom or a similar videoconferencing platform (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Adobe Connect). The candidates judged best by the committee after the initial interview round will advance to the next stage. Depending on the job and the nature of the hiring process, this could be making an offer to the top candidate, advancing to another round of virtual interviews, or sending invitations for a campus visit.

It is important to recognize that the normal outcome of a job interview is that you will *not* advance to the next stage. Moreover, this may not have anything to do with your interview performance. Almost all hiring departments will have a pre-interview ranking of candidates, and based on interview performance, candidates may move up or down that ranking. Suppose the department has narrowed its candidate pool down to 10 candidates, and you are ranked #9. You may interview very well and move up to #5 in the rankings, but if only 3 candidates are being brought to campus, then you will not advance to the next stage.[143] Nevertheless, a poor interview is almost always enough to doom your chances at landing the job, so performing well at the interview stage is important.

There are generally two types of first-round interviews for jobs in academic philosophy:

---

[141] While the application systems do not always require you to upload your documents as PDFs, they tend to look more professional than other document formats. Additionally, many application systems convert your uploads to PDFs regardless of their original format, which can cause errors in font or spacing; you can avoid this if you upload the documents as PDFs yourself.

[142] There are a few jobs that may jump directly from the application phase to campus visits, though this is rare. The main rationale behind doing this is that [interviews are not reliable ways of judging the quality of candidates](). It is even possible for a job search to jump from evaluating applications to making offers, though this is even rarer.

[143] It is still *possible* you will get a campus visit later if all finalists perform poorly on their visits or if all of them decline the job when offered it, but this outcome is unlikely.

- 30-minute structured interview: all candidates are asked the same series of 5 or 6 questions. Candidates have an opportunity to ask questions to the committee during the last few minutes of the interview.
- 45-minute conversational interview: all candidates will be asked a few general questions, but most of the interview will be more of a free-flowing conversation concerning the candidates research and teaching interests. Candidates have an opportunity to ask questions to the committee during the last few minutes of the interview.

During my time on the job market, the 30-minute structured interviews were more common for teaching jobs, and the longer interviews were more common for research-focused jobs. You may be able to deduce the type of interview from the length of your time slot, but you should be prepared for either format.

Some Tips for Virtual Interviews

Although good interview performance is no guarantee of advancing to the next stage of the search process, performing well certainly increases your chances. Here are some things that you should do during or before your interview to help things go better:

1. Test your microphone and webcam in advance of the interview. Ideally, test them during a mock interview and ask your mock interviewers how the video and audio quality is on their displays.
2. Have a backup webcam and/or microphone on hand in case of technical difficulties. As with your primary equipment, be sure to test these devices in case you need to use them.
3. Clear the area in the background of your webcam of clutter or distracting objects. Your background does not need to be a blank white wall, but it also should not have anything that is distracting to the interviewers. Anything unprofessional – such as a poster with profane text or violent artwork featuring your favorite anime hero – should also be removed. Even if the content of such things is not offensive, it may still come across to the interviewers as inappropriate or unprofessional.
4. Try to ensure that the room you are using is quiet and that you will not be interrupted. If that is not possible, give a warning to the interviewers at the start of the interview and explain what they might hear and why.
5. Dress comfortably but professionally. You want to be at ease during the interview, but do not dress so casually that you seem not to be taking it seriously. Business casual attire is probably a good target, though you can dress more formally if that makes you more comfortable. Resist the temptation to dress unprofessionally from the waist down – while the interviewers will usually only see the upper third of your body, that can change if you accidentally nudge the webcam or if you have to get up to grab something. Additionally, when selecting your wardrobe, aim for solid, dark colors – these usually appear more clearly on video and are less distracting than patterned outfits.

6. <u>When answering questions, try to look directly at the webcam rather than at the computer screen</u>. Doing so mimics the eye contact that would be present during an in-person conversation.
7. <u>Keep a glass of water on hand</u>. Beyond the fact that you may get thirsty during the interview, a strategically timed drink can also provide a way to buy a few more seconds to think over a difficult question without appearing nervous or awkward.
8. <u>Practice</u>. Make sure that you have done at least one mock interview with faculty in your department prior to your first real interview. In addition to conducting at least one mock interview, you should also rehearse your responses to common interview questions on your own. I provide a list of these questions in the next subsection.
9. <u>Do not rely on notes to convey your answers</u>. One discussion on the Philosophers' Cocoon suggests that using notes during interviews can lead to both positive and negative results depending on the context of their use, but I would generally advise against relying on them. While there are some instances where using notes can communicate preparedness for the interview, it can also seem like you are not knowledgeable about your area of research specialization or the classes you teach. Giving that impression to committee members is enough to sink your chances for the job. You should rehearse your responses to common questions until you can answer them without using notes.
10. <u>Research the hiring department</u>. While it is definitely possible to overdo this step, you should at least take the time to visit the department's website and peruse the faculty, course offerings, and recent news. This information can help you respond to certain interview questions, especially those connected to the current needs of the department, and can also help you develop questions to ask the committee at the end of the interview.
11. <u>Stay calm</u>. Even in the shorter interviews, it is probable that you will be asked at least one tricky question that you are not prepared for. Less commonly, committee members will try to antagonize you to see how well you can reason under duress.[144] It is critical not to panic in these situations. Slow down if you need to – a strategic sip of water can help a great deal here – and think things through before beginning your response.
12. <u>Be respectful</u>. This is a good general rule for any conversation, but it is especially important for interviews. Do not interrupt your interviewers or be unduly aggressive in your responses. Even if you think a committee member's remarks are ignorant or mean-spirited, respond in ways that are charitable and demonstrate intellectual respect.
13. <u>Identify your strengths as a candidate and emphasize these in your responses</u>. Before the interview, take stock of what aspects of your profile make you a strong candidate for the position. As you answer the questions from the committee, make an effort to remind them these strengths – for instance, by referencing a course you have taught, a prior publication, or some other experience relevant to answering the question. While the

---

[144] In some cases, committee members will also antagonize you unintentionally – by just being abrasive or confrontational. Anecdotes about these kinds of interview experiences are still common enough that this is a scenario you should prepare for.

committee is already familiar with your credentials, they will interview many candidates – perhaps all in the same day. Thus, it can be helpful to subtly remind them of why you are an excellent candidate for this position. Doing this in a natural way does require a bit of verbal finesse, and you may not develop this skill until you have had some practice in a handful of interviews.

14. <u>Aim for concise but informative responses of about 2 minutes in length</u>. These answers should be long enough to answer the question fully but short enough that a committee member could ask a quick follow-up if they were inclined to do so.[145] If they ask you an extremely broad or vague question, a slightly longer response might be warranted, but do not ramble.

15. <u>Do not act like a graduate student</u>. You want your interviewers to perceive you as a future colleague – not a clueless or frazzled graduate student. To the extent possible, you want to avoid being insecure and deferential. You want to be friendly but not fawning or overly complimentary. You want to be assertive and confident without seeming dismissive or arrogant. Obviously, this can be a hard balance to strike, and this is the aspect of interviewing where your prior experience presenting your work to other professionals (e.g., at conferences) pays the biggest dividends.

You might gather from this list that it is hard to interview well. The good news is that you will get better at it with practice and experience. Moreover, strong preparation will often prevent things from going too badly. In that spirit, let's turn to the most common interview questions.

Common Interview Questions

In interviews for academic jobs in philosophy, I believe there are 13 common interview questions.[146] I have split these into 2 categories: The Big 7 and The Little 6. In any interview, you should expect at least <u>4 questions from The Big 7</u> to be asked and <u>1 or 2 questions from The Little 6</u>. The Big 7 are by far the most common questions, and you should know your answers to these questions by heart. The Little 6 are asked with less frequency but still often enough that preparing for them is worth your time.

The Big 7

1. Describe your research and where you see yourself heading in the next few years. (Variant: describe it like you're talking to a college freshman with no philosophical background.)

2. Describe your teaching philosophy and/or how you view yourself in the classroom.

---

[145] I was once advised to respond to questions in 30 seconds or less and invite follow-ups from the committee. The idea behind that suggestion was that it would make the interview seem more like a conversation, but interviewers sometimes do not ask follow-up questions, especially in the shorter interview format – instead, they will just move onto the next question.

[146] I compiled this list from the 30 first-round interviews I had when I was on the job market (2016–2022) and from discussions with others who were on the job market in a similar timeframe.

3. How do you promote diversity and/or inclusiveness in your research and in the classroom?
4. How would you help to recruit undergraduate majors and minors?
5. How would you teach [course listed in the job description]?
6. Describe something that went poorly in your teaching and/or research and what you learned from it.
7. Do you have any questions for us?

The Little 6

1. Our department runs [special program or center], which your job is affiliated with. How would you contribute to this program?
2. What courses would you create to add to our course catalog?
3. What experience do you have writing grants? What kinds of grants might you apply for?
4. Most of our courses are lower-level classes where students have no prior exposure to philosophy. How would you approach teaching these courses?
5. Suppose that you have a student in your course who is struggling. How do you help this student succeed?
6. How do you see yourself fitting in with other members of the department?

Beyond the ones listed above, you should also expect detailed questions about your writing sample (if a writing sample was required). Review your writing sample before the interview to prepare for that possibility.

Even if you prep for all the items above, however, it is still likely that you will be asked at least one question that you did not prepare for. I covered what to do in those scenarios in the prior section, but it might also be useful to consider a sampling of the unusual questions people have been asked in the past. The list below was compiled from this Daily Nous post and this post at the Philosophers' Cocoon:

1. Are you willing to be trained?
2. What does "bioethics" mean to you?
3. What does "social justice" mean to you?
4. Isn't that just wildly implausible?
5. Wouldn't you agree the way you described [philosophical topic or view] is inaccurate?
6. What gets you pissed off?
7. What is the one big idea you will be known for?
8. What is an area of philosophy that interests you but that you don't research or teach about?
9. How come it took you so long to finish your dissertation?
10. Do you think a liberal arts education is a good thing?
11. Given your excellent publications and teaching experience, why don't you already have a tenure-track job?
12. Suppose – just suppose that women are inferior to men – then what?

13. In a cage fight between Kant and a monkey, who would win?
14. Which is more useful in the classroom, a ball or a stick?
15. What is your greatest contribution to philosophy thus far?
16. Do you have any baggage that would keep you from being successful here?
17. On a scale of 1–10 (where 1 is least courageous and 10 is most courageous), how courageous are you?
18. Do you have any skeletons in your closet?
19. How would your friends describe you?
20. What are the main duties associated with this position, and what skills would someone need to succeed at them?
21. How does basketball fit into your philosophical thinking? (asked after the candidate had mentioned sometimes playing pickup basketball)
22. If you could invite 5 philosophers to a dinner party, who would you invite and why?
23. Which professional organization's code of ethics do you think is best and why?
24. What do you see as some of the more important trends in [your subdiscipline] right now?
25. Why didn't you cite [famous philosopher] in your writing sample?
26. Given that the teaching load is 4-4, how do you plan to continue publishing in highly regarded journals?
27. How would you react if a collaborator on a project "checked out" and stopped doing their part?
28. Do you have any hobbies or interests outside of philosophy?
29. What paper are you most proud of and why?
30. If you were given a million dollars, what studies would you run and why?
31. What course would you love to teach but have not yet had the chance to do so?
32. How would you teach a course in this program (that was not listed in the job ad or mentioned on the university website)?
33. What is your experience in the liberal arts environment?
34. How does your teaching, research, and service align with the mission of the university?
35. Can you explain why your research isn't boring?
36. What would you say to a parent who was complaining about a grade they received in your course?
37. Do you have a boyfriend?
38. Are you married?
39. Do you have a religious affiliation?
40. Is there anything that would prevent you from accepting the job if we presented it to you right now?

Some of these questions are just idiosyncratic, but others are clearly inappropriate and/or irrelevant to assessing your ability to do the job well. Nonetheless, someone on a search committee may ask such a question anyway. Expect at least one non-standard question in your interview, and keep your composure when it happens.

<u>What Do You Ask the Interviewers?</u>

Regardless of interview format, you will almost always have a few minutes at the end of the interview to ask the search committee some questions. (Usually, this will be presented similarly to question #7 from The Big 7.) <u>It looks very bad if you have no questions for the committee</u>. At best, you may be perceived to be rather unreflective about the job or the department, and at worst, this might be perceived as disinterested in the position.

So, what do you ask the search committee? If there is anything about the position that you are genuinely unclear about, that is probably a good place to start. Additionally, if there is anything that came up during the interview that you wanted to know more about, that is also worth a question. However, there may not be anything that clearly meets these criteria, so it is important to prepare a few questions before the interview.

In developing your list of questions, I advise **not asking about** either the **philosophy club** or **research leave**. The undergraduate philosophy club at most institutions has little interaction with faculty, and (as I learned the hard way from my own interview experiences) asking about it has become cliché. Asking about research leave should be avoided for a different reason – it suggests that you are already contemplating how to reduce your teaching and service commitments to the department before you even have the job.

Here are a few general questions that you might consider asking if you cannot come up with anything more specific:

1. <u>What are the requirements for tenure?</u> This is hardly a novel question but can be worth asking if this information is not conveyed clearly during the interview.
2. <u>Would there be opportunities to develop a course on [topic that interests you] in your department?</u> Presumably, it is a course that you would be interested in teaching but that has not come up in the interview.
3. <u>What do you enjoy most about working at your university and/or department?</u> This question can give you some insight into the culture of the university or department, and it can also give you an idea of what might make the job worthwhile.
4. <u>What are some of the department's main goals / needs / priorities for the next five years?</u> Asking a question like this conveys an interest in the department's long-term trajectory, and you may also get an insightful answer from the committee. Ideally, you will be able to say something as a follow-up about how you might contribute to furthering those goals.

I recommend having at least 3 questions you plan to ask at the end of the interview. Usually, one of those questions will get answered during the interview itself, so this ensures you still have a couple left to ask.

<u>After the Interview</u>

Your interview might go well, or it might go poorly. Often, you will not know how your interview was perceived by the committee. Nevertheless, it is worth taking a bit of time to reflect on what you think you did well and what you might do differently if you encounter the same situation in the future.

Do not get discouraged if an interview goes badly. You will not ace every interview that you have, and almost every philosopher who has been on the job market will have at least one or two bad interview stories to share. Here are some notably bad interview experiences I have had:

- Technical difficulties that caused the interview to start 15 minutes late
- An interviewer asking many questions but sitting too far away from the microphone for me to hear anything he said
- Forgetting the title of my own book when it was under contract
- Telling a joke that spectacularly fails to land
- Being provided a list of interview questions from the search committee chair and then asked completely different questions during the interview
- Being questioned relentlessly by a hostile committee member about a study I cited in a footnote of my writing sample
- Prepping for an interview question that is almost sure to be asked and then completely blanking on my prepared response during the interview

Of course, in terms of results, interviewing well will not always be distinguishable from interviewing poorly. To echo an earlier point, remember that hiring departments will almost always have a ranking prior to interviewing candidates. You might interview very well but not move up far enough in this ranking to be a finalist.

Some candidates choose to send emails to the interviewers thanking them for their time or expressing that it was nice to meet them. There is nothing wrong with doing this, but whether you send such a note will not affect your chances of advancing to the next stage of the search.

Campus Visits

Imagine that your interview goes well, and you get invited to campus as a finalist. Typically, only 2–4 candidates will be brought to campus as finalists, which means that getting the job is now a very real possibility. That should give you real hope and confidence, but it can also create additional pressure. There is no consolation prize if someone else gets the job, and campus visits are grueling affairs. Let's start by discussing what you actually do on a campus visit.

<u>Your Schedule</u>

Once you have a date for your campus visit, you will typically be given an itinerary that includes a schedule of all meetings and events. Here is an example from one of my own campus visits (with fictitious names and locations):

Wednesday
11:09 am: arrive at airport; picked up by John; you two go to lunch afterward.
1:00 pm – 1:30 pm: meeting with Dean Beth (Humanities 120)
2:00 pm – 3:00 pm: research talk (Library 355)
3:15 pm – 4:00 pm: coffee with students (Starbucks)
4:00 pm – 5:00 pm: meeting with philosophy faculty (Humanities 150)
5:00 pm: John will take you to check into your hotel and relax a bit before dinner.
6:00 pm: Dinner (Riverside Café)

Thursday
8:30 am: Anna will pick you up and bring you to campus.
9:25 pm – 10:40 am: Introduction to Ethics teaching demonstration (Social Sciences 105)
11:00 pm – 11:30 am: meeting with members of the Equity and Inclusion committee
11:45 am – 12:15 pm: meeting with Assoc. Vice Chancellor Alex (Smith Hall 220); Bob will take you to the airport after the meeting
2:33 pm: flight departs

For this campus visit, I was only in town for about 27 hours, but that time was absolutely packed with meetings and presentations. One of the unusual features of this visit is that I gave both a research presentation and a teaching demonstration. (Usually, you will give research talks for research positions and teaching demonstrations for teaching jobs.)

During this frenzy of events, whenever you are in the presence of someone else, you are being interviewed. You should have done some research prior to your interview, but you should dig deeper into the university's administration and mission before your visit. Dress as formally as you can while also being comfortable, be polite to everyone you meet, and be as genuine as possible given the pressure and artificiality of the interactions.

In most of your meetings with administrators, they will tell you a bit about the institution, their role, and how their role is connected to your job or the department that is hiring you. Ask questions at these meetings, and communicate ways in which you might support the broad aims of the university.

Your interactions with faculty will in part be a continuation of the initial interview. You can expect to talk about your teaching and research in more detail. In these interactions, however, you should ask about the faculty's teaching and research interests and give them a chance to talk about themselves. You'll learn more about the department, and the discourse will be more akin to a real conversation rather than a job interview.

Research Presentation

Think of your research presentation as a longer, more polished conference presentation. Most of my [recommendations for conference presentations](#) apply here, but there are some key differences to keep in mind:

- ▪ Administrators and undergraduate students may attend this presentation. Thus, it needs to be accessible not only to philosophers outside your AOS but also to non-philosophers. Define your key terms carefully and proceed through the material more slowly than you ordinarily would. You will normally have much more time to present your material than you do at a conference.
- ▪ Your presentation needs to be as polished as possible. Rehearse this presentation several times before you deliver it to an audience, and make sure you can adhere to the specified time limit.
- ▪ The Q&A session is longer and usually more intense than what you will experience at a typical conference. Philosophers will really dig into your arguments after the presentation and see how deeply you have thought about the underlying issues. It is critical that you maintain your poise during the Q&A and deliver reasonable responses to the questions asked. Continue to be polite even if you believe some members of the audience are being uncharitable to your views.

Do <u>not</u> use your writing sample as the basis for your research presentation. Hiring departments will already be familiar with that material, and they will want to see something new. Moreover, presenting the same material to them twice creates the impression that you do not have very many good ideas.

Teaching Demonstration

Depending on the arrangement, you may be a guest instructor in an existing class or teaching a group of students that is not part of a normal class. You may get to choose what you teach that day, or you might be instructed to teach on a particular topic. Whatever the subject, you want to design a stellar plan for the class session. Use your best teaching methods, and do not try to do something novel that you have never done in the classroom previously. If you normally use PowerPoint, prepare one. If you do in-class writing exercises, design one with a strong prompt. If you normally split students into groups, do that during this class.

One of the other major things you want to do is treat the students well. Even though these are students you may never see again, try to learn their names – or bring nametags they can fill out and position on their desks – and make it clear that you care about their learning. Even though faculty will be in the room observing your teaching, ignore them as much as you can and just focus on interacting with the students. It is crucial that you express enthusiasm for teaching – probably more important than whether all aspects of your formal instruction are effective.

After the Visit

You are likely to return from your campus visit quite exhausted even if you were only gone a day or two. Standard practice is to send thank-you emails to the faculty in the department and possibly the administrators you interacted with. As with sending such notes after interviews, doing so is unlikely to affect anything related to the search. However, in this case, I recommend

sending one of these notes anyway. The hiring institution typically covers all your expenses for the visit, and assuming you were treated with respect, it is appropriate to acknowledge the time and money they devoted to hosting you.

Once your campus visit concludes, you will usually have to wait for a while before a decision is made. There will usually be other finalists visiting the campus, so depending on where you were in the visit order, it could be up to several weeks before you receive any update on your status.

It is heartbreaking to get a campus visit and not get the job, but you may have to endure that fate. In the grand scheme of things, making it that far in a search is a good sign: it suggests you will be competitive for other jobs. But it will be almost impossible to feel that way when you get the news that you were not the chosen candidate. When the disappointment fades, there is nothing to do but continue your job search.

Accepting an Offer

With perseverance, preparation, and some luck, you might emerge from this prolonged process as the top candidate. Should that happen, you will eventually be notified – usually via phone call – that the university wants to offer you the position.[147] Once the initial euphoria (or perhaps just relief) has passed, you will want to carefully review the details associated with your potential new appointment and think about what you might want to negotiate.

Negotiating Your Job Offer

Perhaps the first question you may have about negotiation is whether you should even do it. After all, philosophy is an extreme example of a buyer's market, and you may fear that negotiating puts you at risk of having the offer rescinded. The good news is that the full-blown rescinding of an offer is rare.[148] The bad news is that it still happens: if you make demands that are viewed as unreasonable, the hiring department may extend the job offer to their next choice of candidate.[149] There is nothing wrong with negotiating, but you want to do it in a respectful and reasonable way. You should also have a plausible rationale for whatever you are requesting.

Unfortunately, the art of negotiation is a source of radical dissensus – at least in the context of academic philosophy. People disagree about the strategies to use, how aggressively to negotiate,

---

[147] You can also get a job offer even when you are not the top candidate. Sometimes, the department's first choice declines the offer.

[148] It is hard to know how rare. CU-Boulder's guide to negotiating academic job offers estimates that 2% of these job offers are rescinded. While that is consistent with my intuitions, no explanation or citation is provided to verify this figure.

[149] Often, decisions about how to handle negotiations are not made by the hiring department. The decision to move onto another candidate may be made by the Dean or Provost.

and even whether to negotiate over the phone or over email.[150] There are, however, a few points of broad consensus:

- You generally want to start the negotiation with whatever your biggest ask is. Springing a big ask after a bunch of more modest requests will usually not be received well.
- It is perfectly appropriate to ask about a small salary increase – certainly nothing higher than 10% – but you will rarely be granted a salary increase.
- Negotiations for one-time benefits (e.g., extra money to assist with the move, reduced teaching load in your first year) tend to be more successful than asking for a higher salary or another long-term benefit (such as a spousal hire).
- It is easier to negotiate when you have multiple offers, but you can still negotiate to some extent without other offers.

If the university communicates that something is not negotiable, do not push your luck on that topic. If you want to negotiate further, pivot to a different request.

Tough Decisions

Sometimes candidates must make difficult choices about whether to accept certain offers. For instance, suppose you receive an offer for a position that you are willing to accept but just completed the campus visit or final round interview for a different job that you would prefer. It is easily possible that your window for making a decision on the first offer will expire before you know whether you will be offered the better job. What do you do in such a case?

Some folks, including many of the commenters on this discussion of that scenario, think there would be nothing wrong with accepting the first offer and then rescinding your acceptance if you were offered the second job. The most common rationale for this view is that job candidates are not obligated to be loyal to their potential employers in this context, especially given how unfavorable the academic job market is for the applicants.[151] I am sympathetic to that line of reasoning but also worry that applicants may underestimate the negative impacts of accepting an offer and then declining later in the process – some departments may not be able to fill the position on short notice, and at smaller schools, failed searches sometimes result in lost funding lines. Ultimately, you will have to make your own judgment about what the morally right thing to do is in these situations (should they arise).

A more common type of difficult decision is when you have multiple job offers and no obvious best choice. You might, for instance, have the option of a distinguished postdoc and the option of a tenure-track job with a heavy teaching load. A tenure-track job could offer more stability, but the high teaching load would make it difficult for you to publish enough to relocate to an institution with a lower teaching load later (if that were something you wanted to do). Postdocs

---

[150] For some discussions about negotiating job offers in philosophy, see Part 22 of the Philosophers' Cocoon Job Market Boot Camp series, this 2016 discussion, this 2022 discussion, and this 2023 discussion.

[151] This sentiment is shared in many other business contexts, where the practice of accepting a job offer and then backing out of it in favor of a different offer is commonplace.

are only temporary positions, so you know that you will be on the job market again soon, but they also usually have low teaching loads and offer lots of opportunities for professional development. You might be able to land a job with a lower teaching load if you take the postdoc and try your luck on the market a couple years later. Of course, given the role that luck plays in all this, you might also fare worse on the market next time.

As you can probably guess, there is no straightforward correct choice to the dilemma I just constructed. What you ought to do will depend on your risk tolerance, your impressions of the institutions, your preferences regarding teaching and research, and many of your other personal values. The takeaway is that your time on the job market may culminate in a difficult, life-altering decision. To secure any job at all is an accomplishment in such an unforgiving market, but that thought may not quell the emotional strain and second-guessing that accompanies some of these tough choices.

A Resource for Trans and Non-Binary Philosophers

Trans and non-binary philosophers confront unique questions on the job market. They may wonder whether they should disclose their gender identity in application materials, what they should wear during a campus visit, and how they should broach the topic of pronoun use. I am not an expert on this particular subject, so my recommendation for readers interested in those issues it to read "Trans/Non-Binary Philosophers on the Academic Job Market: A Resource Guide (2022)" by Perry Zurn, Blake Hereth, Christina Friedlander, Tamsin Kimoto, Amy Marvin, and Andrea Pitts. This material offers the most informative advice on this subject that I have seen.

The Reality of Job Placement

Recall that the job market functions much like a weighted lottery. Certain aspects of your application materials, such as a stellar publication record and an abundance of solo teaching experience, will make it more likely that you survive the first cut and secure an interview, but ultimately, how your application is evaluated will depend on the idiosyncratic assessments of search committee members.[152] Thus, no matter how strong your credentials, there is no guarantee that you will get any interviews. And even if you do get some interviews, strong performance in those interviews may not be enough to secure a job offer. For these reasons, you must be prepared for the possibility that you will not secure academic employment.

Even in scenarios where your foray on the job market is rather successful, the result is not likely to be a permanent position. The most likely successful outcome for your first job market run will be a postdoc, VAP, or other short-term position. If you continue to pursue academic employment, you will almost surely face additional relocations. These periodic moves come with a host of costs – financial, physical, social, and mental – and your new appointment will

---

[152] One good discussion of this aspect of the selection process is can be found in "Notes from search committee members, part 2: Dr. Research University on luck and best practices."

typically come with greater responsibilities than those you had as a graduate student. You will, of course, have a higher salary and no longer be grinding out your dissertation, but the journey toward permanent academic employment may not get easier following your completion of the PhD program.[153]

I do not intend to discourage you by sharing this information. I just want you to be prepared for the possibility that your graduate studies may not have the storybook ending that you want even if you have done all the right things to set yourself up for success. If things do turn out that way, it doesn't mean you aren't good enough or that you did anything wrong.

My hope, of course, is that your efforts to navigate the philosophy job market will be successful, and at this point, I have exhausted what I can reasonably say about it. Yet, even as extensive as I have tried to be, I imagine that you may be curious about alternative views on the market or additional resources. In that spirit, here are some collections of posts about the philosophy job market from the Philosophers' Cocoon:

- [Job Market Boot Camp](#)
- [Secret Lives of Search Committees](#)
- [Notes from Both Sides of the Market](#)

I would also encourage you to discuss the job market with your placement director before your final year in the program and to gather information from others you know who have endured the job market gauntlet. Then use your own judgment to determine what kinds of jobs you want to target and what strategies will give you the best chance of success.

---

[153] For an excellent illustration of what this journey can look like (if successful), see Jeremy Davis's "[My Five Years on the Philosophy Job Market](#)."

Part 13: Work-Life Balance

Up to this point, I have focused almost exclusively on how to progress through a graduate program and prepare adequately for the job market. But what about life outside of philosophy? After all, people are not automatons that can read, write, and teach philosophy 16 hours a day. So how do you manage to balance your graduate studies and professional development with your non-academic hobbies, family commitments, and other non-philosophical interests?

Overcoming Procrastination

Graduate school features a lot of unstructured time and a lot of soft deadlines – that is, deadlines that carry minimal penalties if you fail to meet them. That combination can be very dangerous because it provides ample temptation to procrastinate. If you fall into a pattern of putting off work, then you can very quickly find that you've squandered weeks or months without making meaningful progress on your research. Prolonged procrastination can quickly become fatal to your prospects as a graduate student, so let's start with some strategies for managing it.

The most basic method for preventing procrastination was [partially covered in Part 5](#): schedule fixed blocks of time for writing, grading, and other professional duties, and stick to your schedule. The key is staying disciplined with regard to your designated work hours and not allowing other things to distract or interrupt you while you are working.

I am a bit better nowadays at sticking to a consistent work schedule, but I definitely did not have that discipline in graduate school. Thus, instead of trying to maintain an ironclad schedule every week, I followed a strategy of structured procrastination. John Perry opens [his essay on the topic](#) with a succinct illustration of the idea in practice:

> I have been intending to write this essay for months. Why am I finally doing it? Because I finally found some uncommitted time? Wrong. I have papers to grade, textbook orders to fill out, an NSF proposal to referee, dissertation drafts to read. I am working on this essay as a way of not doing all of those things. This is the essence of what I call structured procrastination...

Perry notes that procrastinators rarely do nothing when they procrastinate. Instead, they often garden, clean their apartments, mow the lawn, sort through their mail, and so on. These activities are marginally useful but do not contribute in any way to making progress on the work that needs to be done. Thus, the key to structured procrastination is accumulating other work that needs to be done – work that you can accomplish as a means of putting off other work. In this manner, you can turn your tendency to procrastinate into an incentive to accomplish things.

So how does this work in practice? Let's suppose it's nearing the end of the semester, and you have the following items of your agenda:

- Teaching preparation for your upcoming summer course
- 50 exams to grade

- 50 term papers to grade
- An approaching deadline for a revise-and-resubmit at a journal
- An approaching deadline for a conference where you would like to present
- Completing and submitting forms for reimbursement of travel expenses

Once you've got a list of tasks to complete, you need to rank them in order of importance. Some of the items on this list may be comparable in importance, but suppose that you arrive at this order after some deliberation (including the amount of time you have before the relevant deadline for each item):

1. Complete revise-and-resubmit
2. Grade term papers
3. Grade exams
4. Submit a finished paper to conference
5. Submit a request for travel reimbursement
6. Finish preparation for teaching my summer course

The first item is completing that revise-and-resubmit. But that's going to be tricky: the reviewers raised some pretty good objections, and it'll take some serious work to figure out how to address those. The next two items require grading, and you'd rather not do that. But when you come to item #4, you recall that the paper is pretty close to finished and that the topic is pretty interesting, so you spend that evening working on that paper. In a sense, you work on that paper as a way to avoid doing items 1–3 on the list.

Notice something important here: procrastinating in this way requires a large list of tasks to complete. What if you only had the top three items to do? If that were the case, then the only way to avoid doing them would be to avoid doing work altogether. And if you're a procrastinator, that's just what you'd do.

This idea might seem counterintuitive. Shouldn't procrastinators limit their commitments so they feel less stressed and less overwhelmed by their obligations? Often not. Limiting commitments does not take proper account of procrastinators' nature: procrastinators will not magically stop procrastinating just because they have fewer things to do. Instead, limiting one's commitments undermines one of the procrastinator's most important sources of motivation – the desire to put off existing work. As Perry puts it, limiting one's commitments "is a way to become a couch potato, not an effective human being." The good news for the structured procrastinator is that academia provides plenty of things to do – courses to prep, assignments to grade, presentations to rehearse, articles to read, workshops to attend, and so on.

There remains one question in need of an answer, though: how do the items at the very top of the list get completed? There are three ways that an item at the top of the list gets completed. First, if enough time passes, there's a good chance that some new task will appear that is even more important than the top item on your original to-do list. At that point, the previous task you were avoiding gets replaced by something more significant, and once your no-longer-top item

becomes a means of procrastinating, you can complete that task as a way of avoiding work that's even more undesirable.

A second means of accomplishing the tasks near the top of the list is to use different criteria to order your list. Perry orders the items in terms of importance. I order my own in terms of a combination of enjoyment and importance, with importance serving as a tiebreaker between two items of comparable enjoyment. Personally, the extent to which I want to perform particular tasks varies widely each day. For instance, if I spent the prior day prepping my teaching, then I want to spend the next day doing research. This degree of variability ensures that the list is shuffled frequently enough to prevent one item from staying at the top of the list for too long.

The third means of accomplishing tasks at the top of the list is just getting them done. Period. Sometimes, structured procrastination is not enough to get everything done. Items that are very important but stressful or unenjoyable (e.g., grading exams, writing a dissertation) may sit at the top of the list for a very long time. At a certain point, you just have to suck it up and do the work. That shouldn't be surprising: it would be naive to think that structured procrastination would be an effective means of handling *all* of your work-related tasks.[154]

Naturally, there are intermediary strategies that combine a consistent working schedule with structured procrastination. I recommend experimenting with some different strategies for overcoming procrastination to find out what suits you.

Digital Media and Electronic Communication[155]

Procrastination is one habit that can interfere with your ability to work efficiently. Another is digital media consumption. The list of apps and platforms – Snapchat, Facebook, YouTube, Netflix, and so on – is constantly growing, and these forms of media tend to be very rewarding. Perhaps too rewarding. It's hard to do philosophy well, even under ideal conditions. It's even harder when the world is constantly bombarding you with advertisements, social media notifications, emails, and other forms of media that try to grab your attention. We have become so fixated on our phones that their mere presence actually soaks up cognitive resources and makes us less intelligent. Worse yet is the fact that many aspects of these technologies are addictive. People come to crave the likes, comments, and retweets that accompany their social media posts. Perhaps even more troublingly, some forms of social media are *negatively* associated with well-being, which means that increased social media use is often associated with lower levels of happiness.

---

[154] This material on structured procrastination draws heavily on two old posts on The Philosophers' Cocoon: Balance Series, Part 7: An Overview of Structured Procrastination and Balance Series, Part 8: Problems with Structured Procrastination Revisited.

[155] This material on digital distractions is based almost entirely on my blog post "Balance Series, Part 10: Resisting Digital Distractions." For additional discussion of time management strategies, see this post by Helen De Cruz and this Daily Nous post about getting work done during the summer. For a deep dive specifically on managing emails, see this post by Anna Lännström.

The time social media takes from us can be hard to appreciate, A few seconds to check Twitter or Instagram does not seem like much lost time, but when it is done dozens of times a day, the time costs are harder to calculate. Additionally, there are significant cognitive costs to interrupting tasks to check social media.

Some people are under the impression that they can multitask effectively and that their media use doesn't really impact their productivity much in the grand scheme of things. The problem is that they are almost surely wrong about this. The term "multitask" is a misnomer; what we actually do is switch between multiple tasks. And the literature on task switching is pretty conclusive: it makes us worse at whatever we're doing, including media-related tasks. When our students multitask, it impairs their ability to learn, and in professional settings, it makes people less efficient overall. Additionally, we are amazingly bad at measuring our task-switching abilities – those who do it the most are frequently among the worst at doing it.

What does this all mean for the academic philosopher living in the 21st century? It means that producing high-quality work in an efficient manner is in tension with being a zealous technophile. If you want the ideal work-life balance – one in which you can juggle all the elements of a full academic life simultaneously – then you must exercise restraint when it comes to your engagement with social media, videogames, and other aspects of the digital world.

I'm not advocating that everyone quit Facebook or ignore their emails, but I am advocating mindfulness about what and how much interaction one has with the digital world.[156] Social media might fill an important role in your life, but how much time are you willing to sacrifice for it? The average internet user now spends almost 2 and a half hours on social media and messaging services. That's more than **17 hours per week**. In total, a week only has 168 hours, and if you're getting a healthy amount of sleep, you'll only be **awake for 112 hours**. Is social media really so important that it should consume **one-seventh of your conscious experience**? I don't think so.

What can you do to keep the digital distractions at bay? An obvious strategy would be to close or deactivate all our social media accounts, but few of us are probably willing to go that far. Social media does have some benefits, after all. So here are a few milder suggestions for resisting the pull of social media and other digital distractions:[157]

1. During the workday, unless you are expecting an important call, put your phone on silent and only check it when you are on breaks or otherwise unoccupied. Alternatively, disable social media and messaging applications during the workday or uninstall them from your phone altogether.
2. If you are not willing to follow the prior guidelines about phone usage, then install and use apps that limit your use of other apps. Configure the settings so that you do not have access to your most frequently used apps during the workday. It may seem like I am

---

[156] For a similar perspective, see Cal Newport's "On Digital Minimalism."

[157] This is some overlap here with the guidelines I offered for avoiding distractions when writing.

belaboring the importance of curtailing your phone use, but those devices are by far the biggest distractions for most people during the workday.

3. Make a schedule for checking email – perhaps once in the morning, once at lunch, and once in the evening. Try to respond to important messages within 24 hours, but do not worry about responding to every new message the day it arrives.

4. When using social media, check your feeds, make your posts, and respond to messages all in one swoop. Then leave it be until tomorrow. As with email, frequent exposure to Instagram, Facebook, and the like brings the constant threat of distraction.

5. Delete social media accounts you rarely use or otherwise do not need, and unsubscribe from blogs that rarely read. Reassess what accounts you need to keep using at least once every year.

6. Resist making new social media accounts or adding blogs to your reader or feed. Determine whether these actions will really provide a meaningful benefit before you do so – too often, we add things to our lives that we do not need without weighing up the long-term costs of such decisions.

You may not do *all* these things, but you can probably do some of them. In doing so, you can make it easier to carve out large blocks of time that quality research, writing, and teaching preparation usually requires.

Avoiding Overcommitment[158]

The 22nd entry in Daniel Silvermint's list of graduate student traps reads as follows: "If I want to be a successful grad, I have to say yes to every opportunity that comes my way. After all, opportunities don't have costs." Despite the sarcasm, Silvermint captures a thought that many graduate students have: if you aren't taking advantage of every opportunity available to you, then it's easy to worry that you aren't doing enough. As a result, you may be tempted to pursue any outside opportunity or agree to any optional request. Unfortunately, this strategy can backfire spectacularly.

Don't get me wrong: it's good to take initiative. You'll need to be something of a go-getter to develop the professional credentials needed to be competitive on the job market. But you also have to learn to say "no" once in a while. You can't spend all your time attending graduate student senate meetings, presenting at conferences, holding writing conferences with your students, attending department colloquiums, and coaching a high school ethics bowl team. That's a recipe for stagnation on your writing and a massive delay in your dissertation progress. You have to keep your optional commitments in check.

As an illustration, consider the graph below that summarizes 2022 survey data from Times Higher Education.[159] About 20% of the respondents "strongly agreed" that they were likely to

---

[158] Portions of this subsection are derived from my blog posts "Balance Series, Part 5: Avoiding the 61-Hour Work Week" and "Balance Series, Part 9: Protecting Your Hobbies."

[159] See also this post at Daily Nous summarizing some of the study's other findings.

leave their academic positions in the next 5 years due to excessive workload. Remarkably, that number is closer to 30% for academics working in North America. These results highlight how important it is for academics to be conscientious about how they handle their optional commitments.

To what extent do you agree that you are likely to leave the higher education sector in the next five years because of an excessive workload?
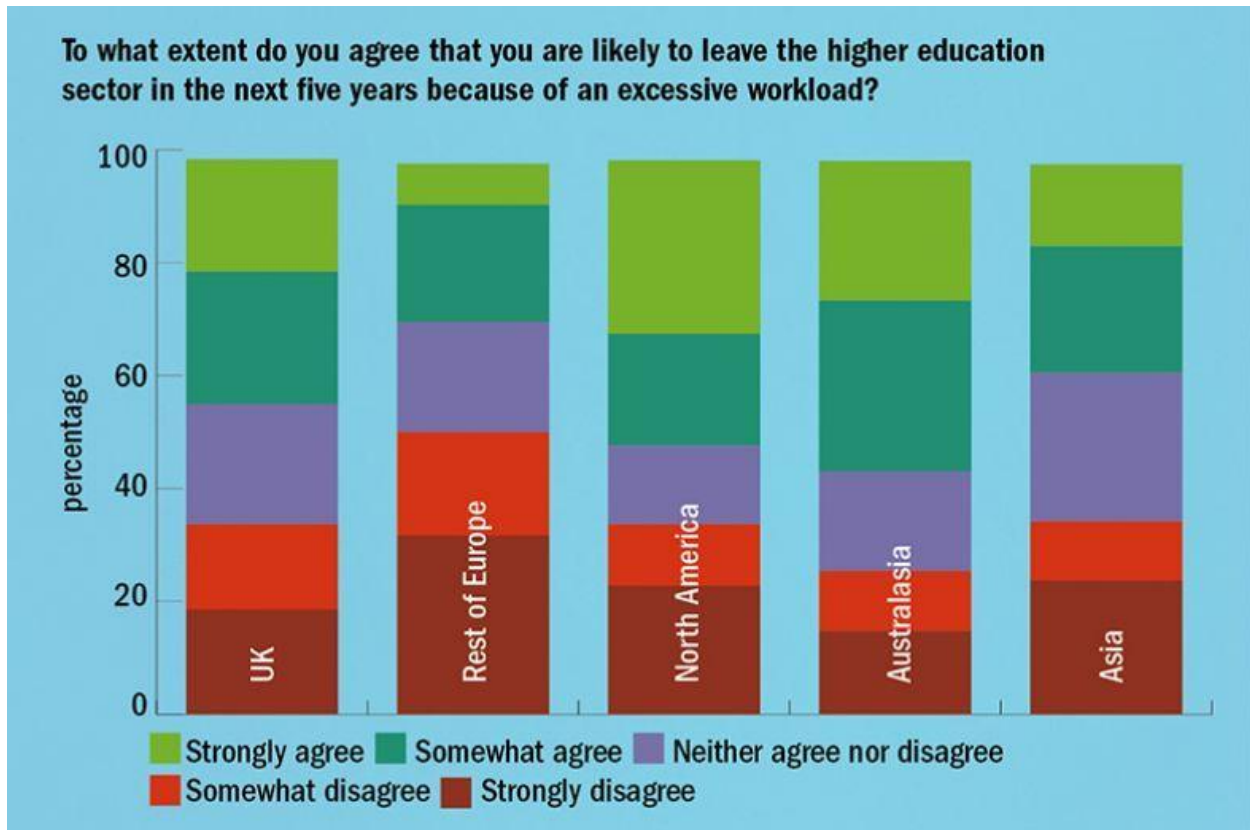
Of course, that's easier said than done. Sometimes over-commitment results from decisions that were made many months in advance (e.g., agreeing to present at a conference) or from events that cannot be reasonably predicted (e.g., getting a revise-and-resubmit verdict from a journal). If these things occur at an inconvenient time during the semester, then you can get overwhelmed pretty quickly. Under those circumstances, how do you keep your workload manageable?

The first and most important piece of advice I will offer is this: **get your sleep**. If you have to stay up late one night to meet a deadline, then so be it, but go to bed early the next night and catch up on your rest. Being chronically sleep-deprived is bad for your health and disastrous for your work. Getting less than 7 hours of sleep per night substantially impairs your cognitive functioning. Philosophy is hard to do well when you're rested and fully engaged; trying to do it well while tired borders on impossible.

The logic behind sacrificing sleep to get work done is that you gain time. Staying up an extra 2 hours gives you 2 extra hours of work time, so even if you get a little tired, the extra time still leads to a net gain overall productivity. However, I suspect that this line of reasoning is often fallacious. You do gain time in the short-term, but you lose time in the long-term. You will

161

become mentally exhausted faster the following day, which means that you are unlikely to work as many hours as you usually would. Additionally, the hours that you work while tired will probably be inefficient, which means that working fewer hours at a higher degree of efficiency might well be more productive overall.

Perhaps this is why so many famous scientists and writers – Charles Darwin, John Lubbock, Anthony Trollope, Charles Dickens, and many others – generally only did intense work for about four hours each day.[160] Such people managed to be remarkably prolific because they were so productive during these focused periods of their workdays and because they were able to maintain this routine nearly every day.

Not all sleep deprivation results from intentional choices. One common habit that can disrupt your sleep patterns is working on a computer before bedtime. The blue light emitted by computer monitors can disrupt your circadian rhythm because of its similarity to sunlight. That means that extended work in front of a computer monitor in the evening can make it harder to relax and get to sleep after you conclude your work. Fortunately, there are apps for computers and other devices that alter the hue of the monitor light so that this affect can be avoided. My personal favorite is f.lux. This software adjusts your monitor as the day progresses so that its display in the evening resembles lamp light more than sunlight, which will hopefully help you work in the evenings without struggling to fall asleep afterward.

One habit that can aid sleep is getting regular exercise. Obviously, there are other health-related reasons for incorporating exercise into your weekly routine, but one significant benefit of exercise is that you will tend to fall asleep more easily and sleep more deeply. It can also be helpful to have a consistent routine that precedes going to sleep. If you find a pattern that helps you unwind in the evening and fall asleep easily, stick to it.

My second critical piece of advice is to **stay committed to at least one non-philosophical hobby**. Given the need to engage in professional development, you will feel a lot of pressure to be productive and build your CV. This creates a strong incentive to get fully immersed in your work and minimize non-philosophical pursuits. While some philosophers have gone this route and been successful,[161] this level of philosophical immersion is neither sustainable nor desirable for most of us.

The rewards associated with academic life tend to manifest in the form of long-term gratification and usually require substantial investment to be obtained. These rewards can be very powerful, but the effort and frustration required to attain them sometimes overwhelms the good feelings they eventually produce. For this reason, a worthwhile life in academic philosophy will usually require more sources of enjoyment than just reading, writing, and teaching philosophy.

---

[160] A succinct profile of these figures and the phenomenon of the 4-hour work pattern can be found on pages 53–74 of Alex Soojung-Kim Pang's *Rest* (Basic Books, 2016).

[161] Consider, for instance, these remarks about Derek Parfit or this profile of Jeff McMahan.

You will surely enter graduate school with some hobbies outside of philosophy, but these hobbies can easily become stifled as graduate school progresses. There is always some important task to complete that seems more important. When you're relaxing and not working, it's easy for your mind to drift to the work that lies in wait and for feelings of guilt or anxiety to emerge. Over time, it's easy for life outside philosophy to erode until it becomes little more than an afterthought.

You don't want this to happen to you. The result is that you become, in Marcus Arvan's words, "a ghost of a person" – a person whose life becomes almost singularly structured around a lone pursuit and thereby lacks the multifaceted fulfillment that a flourishing human life requires. Thus, just as you need to protect the time devoted to your writing and research, you also need to protect the time devoted to your most passionate hobbies.[162] Doing so is usually better for your well-being, and it can also boost one's productivity. Regularly taking time to recharge your mind can help you work more efficiently and produce higher quality work. Moreover, hitting the philosophy grind 10-12 hours per day, even if sustainable in the short term, will lead to chronic fatigue (or worse) in the long term.

Concern about work hours brings us to the third bit of advice: **watch your weekly work hours**. A study conducted at Boise State University found that professors there were working an average of 61 hours per week. That workload might be doable in spurts, but trying to sustain that for an entire semester will lead a lot of graduate students to burnout. To prevent that outcome, track your work hours for at least one semester early in your graduate career. Once you have some data on how many hours you work each week, think about how strenuous you found the weekly grind to be and then try to determine your ideal number of weekly work hours. In my own case, I found that a number in the upper 40s or low 50s was sustainable, but working 55 hours per week (or more) was not. Once you have a set number of hours that you want to work each week, you can take concrete steps with your schedule to ensure that you generally stay near that number, such as ending your workday at a specific time or limiting your work on weekends.[163]

If you want to reduce your total work hours from their current amount while maintaining your current level of output, then you will need to either work more efficiently or reduce your number of optional commitments. I have already discussed the importance of saying "no" on occasion and not getting bogged down by optional commitments, but what about working more efficiently? Part of improving your efficiency comes naturally from getting better at your craft: with more practice at writing papers, grading exams, and prepping classes, you will be able to do

---

[162] Generally, I don't think it matters much what your particular hobbies are, but if your hobbies require alcohol or other addictive substances, then those hobbies might exacerbate your problems with work-life balance rather than solving them. Alcoholism and substance abuse can easily derail academic careers, so please seek professional help if you are battling an addiction.

[163] Some further scheduling strategies are discussed by Eric Schwitzgebel in "In Defense of Weekends, Evenings, Holidays, and Sleep."

these more quickly. You can also make significant gains in your work efficiency by eliminating pseudo-work from your routine.

By "pseudo-work," I mean the inefficient, half-hearted work that we often do in place of real work. When you're responding to emails while watching Netflix, that is pseudo-work. When you're reading an article while also texting with a friend, that is pseudo-work. When you're revising a paper while checking Facebook notifications, that is pseudo-work. Pseudo-work creates the illusion that you're working, but because your time is being split between multiple activities, your productivity will tend to be poor relative to what you could achieve if you were focusing solely on your work. My fourth piece of advice is to **eliminate pseudo-work from your professional life**.

Eliminating digital distractions via the strategies discussed in the [prior subsection](#) will help eliminate a lot of pseudo-work. But I recommend doing more than that. Develop a routine for working such that when you are working, that's the only thing you're doing. Make the division between work and leisure more concrete, and as a general rule, keep those spheres of activity separate. There are some social contexts where the boundaries will blur – think about dinner with a colleague at a professional conference or the weekly discussion held with a reading group – and it is not a crime to enjoy one's work. The general point is simply that blending work and leisure can lead to engaging in pseudo-work and taking 3 hours to complete a task that would take only 1 hour of sustained concentration.

Another good strategy for avoiding pseudo-work is altering your environment so that you do not have much to do other than work. As one stark example of this, a friend of mine in graduate school wrote the bulk of his dissertation in a dingy office underneath the university's football stadium. When I asked him why he did his writing in such a drab setting, he mentioned two things. First, the office was very isolated, so he was never interrupted while he was there. Second, the wireless network was extremely spotty in that underground section of the building, which discouraged him from trying to browse the internet. Thus, while he was in that office, there were no major distractions to prevent him from working on his dissertation. He wrote a lot in that setting because there was nothing else to do there. A strategy that extreme may not appeal to you, but working in an environment that encourages you to just do the work makes a big difference. This is one reason why many graduate students prefer to work in university libraries: in a quiet environment surrounded by other people who are working, it feels more natural to do one's own work.

Before moving on, I must acknowledge that even judicious adherence to these four guidelines will not prevent you from having long work weeks. Your professional obligations will tend to come in bunches at predictable intervals during academic terms (such as when students submit midterm exams or term papers), so there will be moments where your work hours briefly spike. That shouldn't be a problem so long as you return to more sustainable work hours afterward. Just don't get caught in a pattern where you are feeling stressed and overworked week after week.

Social Life

One major aspect of personal and professional life is interacting with others. But how much is ideal? That will depend on your personality. Some people thrive in the presence of others and need regular social interactions to feel fulfilled. Others find social interactions draining and need prolonged periods of isolation to recover from them. You will have to use your own judgment regarding how big you want your circle of friends to be and how frequently you interact with them. Nevertheless, for almost everyone, it is important to forge some friendships in graduate school and to have some sort of support network. You will spend a lot of time alone when you are focusing on your work, and having a few friends to chat with – whether it's exchanging ideas, trading tales of woe, or just discussing non-philosophical matters – can be a refreshing change of pace. Additionally, having a support network for when things aren't going well can make those times much more bearable. You do not have to limit your friends to philosophers, of course, but your peers in the program are the most likely ones to understand and empathize with your circumstances.

The best way to integrate your social commitments into all your professional activities is to have at least some of them are predictable. If it is a group gathering (e.g., film viewings, reading group meetings, a D&D session, weekly workouts), do those activities on a consistent schedule so you can plan your other commitments around them. It is also a good idea to keep some time during the week vacant for more spontaneous happenings or for occasional meals with colleagues. If you are in a relationship, make sure you devote appropriate time to that as well.

Family Planning

One question that [many graduate students will consider is whether to have children during their graduate studies](#). For career-related reasons, there can be significant benefits to waiting until after tenure to have children, but since tenure-track jobs are becoming harder to attain, many people will not have the option to wait until after tenure, especially if they do not start graduate school immediately after completing their undergraduate studies. Furthermore, [the notion of "the perfect academic baby" is largely a myth](#): even with ideal planning, circumstances will rarely align so well that your child is born in the perfect window so as to have a minimal impact on your life.

There are, of course, significant short-term costs to having a child – at least as far as one's graduate studies are concerned. Young children require a lot of time and attention, they tend to disrupt their parents' sleep patterns, and they can exhaust parents' emotional energy. And of course, women must also navigate the physiological aspects of pregnancy. These factors can make it harder for parents to do high-quality academic work compared to non-parents. The financial costs of child-rearing can also be considerable, particularly since graduate students are usually living on meager stipends.

Furthermore, women in the profession may face additional career obstacles as a result of having children, whether this choice is made in graduate school or later.[164] In "Are Children Career Killers?", Kelly Baker recalls being told by senior female scholars that having more than one child would be detrimental to her career, and the data support this thought. Consider a few findings highlighted in Mary Ann Mason's *Do Babies Matter: Gender and Family in the Ivory Tower*: Mothers are 132% more likely than fathers to end up in low-paid contingent positions, only 1 in 3 women on the tenure-track is a mother, and mothers with children under the age of 6 are 21% less likely to land a tenure-track job than women without children.

Strikingly, men do not appear to suffer any penalty for having children. As Mason states in *The New York Times*, "For men having children is a career advantage, and for women it is a career killer."[165] This phenomenon isn't just the result of biological differences: there is experimental evidence that mothers face discrimination in the workplace and that fathers do not.

Beyond these considerations, there are also broader concerns about whether academic life in general is hostile to family life.[166] Academic life offers more flexibility than many other careers with regard to how you spend your time, but formal and informal evening events – a fairly common feature of academic life – are much more difficult to attend when you have to find childcare for those evenings. Traveling to conferences or other events is also more difficult, and the multiple relocations that may follow graduate school (due to landing temporary appointments) can be harder to navigate with a family, especially if your partner has a quality job that is tied to your current geographic location. At the same time, having people who are making the move with you may make the transition easier and provide some social support in an unfamiliar place. Supporting a family on a graduate student stipend may also prove financially unrealistic if this is your only source of income.

So where do all these considerations leave us with regard to having a child in graduate school? My personal experience does not provide much meaningful insight into answering this question.[167] I did not have children in graduate school, and I was never in a relationship during that stretch of my life where the subject of starting a family ever arose. Fortunately, others in the profession have tried to answer this question.[168] Here is some of the advice they have provided:

1. Set clear expectations with your partner regarding when you will be available for family time and what your child-caring responsibilities will be.

---

[164] See, for instance, "Mommy Tracks and Public Policy: On Self-Fulfilling Prophecies and Gender Gaps in Promotion" by Kjell Lommerud, Odd Straume, and Steinar Vagstad.

[165] See also her article in Slate on the same subject.

[166] See also "Why a PhD Program is a Hostile Environment for a Family" by Jared Oliphant.

[167] Those familiar with my research and published work will know that I favor people having small families – mainly for environmental reasons – but those arguments lie outside the scope of this discussion. In this section, I'm just focusing on the question of whether having children will negatively impact one's professional prospects.

[168] For some examples, see the discussions on the Philosophers' Cocoon here, here, here, and here. See also David Rodriguez's "The Trials and Triumphs of a Single Parent in Grad School."

2. Guard against procrastination, since you never know when your child might get sick and need more care than usual.
3. Be flexible with your schedule: your old work routine may not work anymore.
4. If you are comfortable doing so, talk to your department about your new circumstances. If you're ABD, keep your advisor in the loop about your dissertation progress.
5. Be proactive about learning what benefits and rights you have through your university – do not rely on your department chair or anyone else to provide you with this information (even if they should).
6. If you are a woman, do not allow people to *only* identify you as a mother when you return to work following childbirth; if necessary, redirect conversations to be about your research and teaching rather than about the new member of your family.
7. Be creative with carving out time to do your work.[169]
8. If you're going to breastfeed your child, make arrangements with your department so that you will have the necessary space to pump after you return to work and/or determine where available lactation rooms are on campus.

Beyond philosophy, plenty of other academics have also wrestled with the challenges associated with pregnancy and parenthood while in graduate school.[170] If there are professors in your department that had children during graduate school, I encourage you to discuss the matter with them and see what advice they offer. Decisions about whether and when to procreate are among the weightiest decisions people make in their lives, and gathering a breadth of perspectives on the matter may help you and your partner assess what you should do.[171]

Physical Health

Maintaining good health is a crucial aspect of a well-balanced life, but the toll that graduate school can take on one's physical health is often overlooked. There are many factors that may cause your physical health to deteriorate in graduate school. Here are some of them:

- High stress levels
- Sleep deprivation
- Too much time sitting in front of a computer screen
- Difficulty finding time to exercise
- Difficulty maintaining a proper diet
- Vulnerability to illness

These factors also intertwine in ways that can create vicious feedback loops. For instance, the high stress levels some experience during graduate school can lead to difficulty sleeping. Sleep

---

[169] To offer an extreme example, Graham Oddie evidently wrote large portions of *Value, Desire, and Reality* on a laptop in his van while his daughters participated in rehearsals of the Denver Young Artists Orchestra.

[170] One good example is Inger Mewburn's "Parenting Through a PhD."

[171] While it is far rarer for a graduate student to adopt a child in graduate school, most of the material here would also apply to that scenario, though navigating the complications of pregnancy would not be a concern.

deprivation can decrease a person's ability to work efficiently, which might cause more stress as a result. Both sleep deprivation and higher stress levels lead to an increased vulnerability to illness, and getting sick may only lead to a further increase in stress levels. Similarly, as Brianna Larson notes, healthier foods are sometimes difficult to afford on the meager stipends that graduate students receive, and our dietary choices can affect our sleep. Being unable to afford healthier foods can be especially problematic when so much of your time reading, writing, responding to emails, and prepping your teaching is likely to be spent sitting idly in front of a computer.

In these ways (and others), graduate school creates a number of challenges to staying healthy. It is easy for these things to become minimized if you become singularly focused on your professional goals. Here are some strategies that may help you maintain good physical health:

- Schedule exercise into your weekly routine. If you know others who are interested, try to make it a social event. In this manner, you create a social expectation around exercising, which may make you more likely to stick to it.
- Visit every grocery store near where you live to determine which ones have the best prices on healthier foods. The variability in pricing can be significant, and foods lower in calories and higher in nutrients might be more affordable in certain venues than others. In general, shop where your preferred food is cheapest.[172]
- See a physician annually for a checkup. Virtually all teaching assistantship packages include health insurance, which should make this affordable. If you are not immunocompromised, you should also get vaccinated for the flu and other seasonable ailments as needed. Some of these vaccines should be free for students and faculty at your university.
- If you are sick or starting to get sick, get the rest you need. Some graduate students try to continue working according to their usual schedules, but this is a mistake. It will most likely result in you being ill for longer than necessary, and the quality of your work will suffer. Additionally, do not interact with others while you are sick: work from home, and if you need to teach, hold your class online or design an alternative assignment.
- Maintain a consistent sleep schedule. Establish a routine before you go to sleep and begin that routine at roughly the same time every night. This isn't always possible, but stick to it as much as you can.

There is a lot to do in graduate school, but make sure maintaining your physical health does not fall off your priority list completely.

---

[172] I realize this does not account for many other relevant aspects of making food choices. Not all food suppliers are equally ethical in their practices, for instance. But I also think it is reasonable for graduate students to prioritize the costs of food over other factors until they have greater income.

Part 14: Obstacles to Finishing Graduate School

Across all disciplines, it is commonly said that 50% of doctoral students never get the degree. In 2011, the National Research Council published the results of a survey that evaluated graduate students who entered programs between 1996–1997 and 2005–2006, and among the 90 programs surveyed, the median completion rate in philosophy doctoral programs was only 38.6%.[173] More recent data is a bit more favorable and suggests the completion rate in philosophy PhD programs might be closer to 70%, though there is a lot of variance in the data from program to program.

Part of the reason why so many fail to complete the PhD is that it is difficult. It takes a long time, and much of the work – especially the dissertation – requires a lot of skill and focus to complete. I've covered these matters already, but they only paint part of the overall picture. For many graduate students, the main reason that they do not get the doctorate lies in some unexpected obstacle that arises during graduate school. In this part of the guide, I will survey some of these obstacles and consider some ways that they can be overcome.

Mental Illness

Sadly, mental illness is a normal part of academia. Sadder still, there is a tendency for people to keep quiet about it. Part of that stems from the stigma attached to mental illness: faculty and graduate students are concerned about how they will be perceived if they disclose their struggles, so they tend to keep a stiff upper lip and try to handle it on their own. For those who grapple with mental illness during their time as a graduate student, there are two major points to stress.

First, **you are not alone**. It may seem like everyone else is just fine, but it's a safe bet that's not true. That's one reason why Peter Railton's Dewey Lecture from 2015 (in which Railton discussed his own experiences with depression) resonated so deeply with so many philosophers.[174] Even though there is not as much open discussion about mental illness in academia as there should be, the experience is common. You will find many who can relate to your circumstances if you are willing to share them.

Second, **do not be reluctant to seek help**. Your university undoubtedly offers counseling services, and you do not have to face mental illness in isolation. If you can see a professional, they may be able to prescribe a medication that will help alleviate some of your symptoms, or they may be able to provide therapy that can put you on a path to recovery. If you are unable or unwilling to see a professional counselor or therapist, then perhaps look into a more localized support group. One possibility might be the Mental Health and Disability Network (hosted on Discord) that was started by Parker Rose and Alexandra Gustafson. If that is not an option, then you will need to lean heavily on your social support group. Whatever you do, however, do not

---

[173] You can view a concise overview of the survey results here.

[174] See also the open discussion about depression at Daily Nous.

cut yourself off from others and try to cope with it yourself. That is most likely to make things worse.

Beyond these points, I also strongly recommend that you **be transparent with your graduate or dissertation advisor about what is happening**. Obviously, this is easier said than done. You may feel very vulnerable doing this and would rather avoid this conversation. If you do not have a good relationship with your advisor, this could feel especially awkward. However, keeping your advisor in the loop will help them adjust their expectations and better support you.

Mental illness can be debilitating and all-consuming. For those coping with one or looking for ways to support others who are struggling, I recommend consulting [Appendix D: The Shadow Self](). Although it focuses primarily on depression, much of the advice in that appendix should generalize to other mental illnesses, especially since symptoms of depression tend to overlap with an array of other mental illnesses.

Burnout

Over the many years you are in graduate school, there will be times that the intellectual strain of your studies (perhaps combined with mounting stress or other challenges) can lead you to a state of emotional, mental, or physical exhaustion. This state, often called burnout, can make it difficult to complete graduate school if it lasts too long, especially if it happens at the dissertation stage.

Burnout in the context of graduate school is almost always the result of poor work-life balance. Most likely, you were pushing yourself too hard for too long and not allowing enough time for rest and recreation. If you are experiencing burnout, then the only solution is to ease up on things for a while and let yourself mentally recover. <u>Absolutely do not push yourself further</u>: that will only make things worse. When you start to feel better (which might take a few weeks), assess how you can alter your work habits to make them more sustainable.

Running Out of Funding

If you take too long to complete your dissertation, you risk running out of your guaranteed funding from the department. Since the median time to degree in philosophy (7 years) is longer than the guaranteed funding offered by most PhD programs (5 years), this is a common problem. Here are some ways to handle it:

1. <u>See if your department typically funds graduate students beyond 5 years</u>. Some departments almost always do this; some departments almost never do. If it is uncertain, find out how these decisions are made and see what you might be able to do to increase the chances that the department will extend one more year of funding to you. For instance, the department might only extend funding in those cases to graduate students who they are confident will finish their dissertation during that year.

2. <u>Obtain funding from another source</u>. The most common method for doing this would be to obtain a fellowship from elsewhere in your university. Most PhD granting institutions will have some fellowships that are awarded to a small number of doctoral students each year. These fellowships are quite competitive but worth applying for.[175] It is also possible to obtain funding by winning a national fellowship, such as a [Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship](#), although the odds of getting one of these distinguished awards are very low.

3. <u>Finish your dissertation during the summer of your final year of funding</u>. If you are far enough along on your dissertation, you might be able to rush to a dissertation defense before the monetary well runs dry. You will learn at some point in the spring whether your funding will be renewed for another year. If your funding is not going to be renewed, then you will have about 3 months to finish your dissertation and schedule a defense to officially graduate during the summer.

If none of these methods work, then you will need to enroll in a few credit hours – it could be as few as one credit hour depending on the policies at your institution – while you continue to work on the dissertation. You'll pay tuition on those credit hours, and you also will not get any stipend from the department or have an appointment as a teaching assistant. This can lead graduate students to adjunct at various institutions to try to pay their bills.

The scenario I have just sketched is the ABD purgatory that all too many graduate students never escape. Should you find yourself there, your best bet is to <u>finish the dissertation as soon as possible</u> – ideally in the first academic year after your funding has expired. If that means teaching fewer courses as an adjunct than you would prefer, then so be it. The longer that your dissertation lingers in this void, the easier it becomes to delay its completion. And the longer you delay its completion, the more likely it becomes that you will never buckle down and finish it.

Hostile Relationships with Faculty

Although a relatively rare occurrence, a poor relationship with the faculty in your department could pose a serious problem for finishing graduate school. One scenario like this would be if there are only a few faculty who work in your area of specialization, and you do not get along well with any of them. In that scenario, you can bet that your dissertation work will be awkward and difficult. If you anticipate that this will be a serious problem, you should consider transferring to another program. Otherwise, you run the risk of not finishing your dissertation, taking an overly long time to complete your dissertation, or not having strong letters of recommendation from your dissertation committee members. All of these are undesirable outcomes.

---

[175] Even if you have departmental funding secured, these fellowships are usually still desirable. They may provide a larger stipend, a reduction to your teaching load, or both. Additionally, if you secure one of these fellowships, it may open up a funding line in your department for another graduate student who needs it.

A more extreme type of hostile relationship is when a faculty member uses their authority over you to abuse you or coerce you. This behavior may go beyond inappropriateness or harassment and could constitute a serious threat to your well-being or safety. Unfortunately, if the faculty member engaging in this behavior is a well-respected senior member of the department, trying to hold them accountable through the university's mechanisms (something I discussed briefly in Part 2) may not be effective. If you encounter this problem early in your graduate career, it may be best to try to transfer elsewhere, especially if the department has a culture that permits such behavior. If you are late in your graduate studies, then you might consider just avoiding that person and working with other faculty members to complete your degree.

Dealing with Crises

You are probably going to be in graduate school for at least 6 years. Over such a long time, you should expect that there will be crises to overcome while completing your graduate studies. I have already mentioned mental illness (which can certainly count as a crisis in many cases), but here are some other examples:

- A severe illness or other threat to your physical health
- The death or severe illness of a spouse or family member
- Divorce or a similar fracturing of an intimate relationship
- Unexpected pregnancy
- Being the victim of a violent crime (e.g., robbery, sexual assault)

When these things happen, they usually have a huge impact on your well-being and demand a great deal of your emotional energy. It is even possible for some of these to be so disruptive to your life that you need to take a break from graduate school. In such a case, you should review your institution's leave-of-absence policy and see how taking a semester off might affect you.

Taking a leave of absence is typically a last resort, though. In most cases, the better option is to manage whatever crisis emerges in a different way. The most important thing to do is cut back on your commitments and devote the necessary time and energy to dealing with the situation – whether that means taking time to grieve, seeing a therapist, spending time with friends, or discussing an important choice with your partner. Do not ignore a crisis or pretend it is not a big deal. If you are comfortable doing so, I encourage you to also keep your peers and professors informed of what has happened. This will help them better understand any absenteeism they observe, why you are taking an incomplete in their class, or why you need more time to get them the next dissertation chapter.

Once you've dealt with the crisis, revisit your 5-year-plan. See if anything that transpired has disrupted your trajectory. If so, adjust your short-term goals accordingly. One of the central purposes of the 5-year-plan is to help keep your progression in graduate school on track in the aftermath of a crisis, so make sure you use it to refocus on your studies once life returns to normal.

But What If Leaving Really Is the Right Move?

Even with all the caveats I have mentioned and all the strategies available to help you navigate the challenges to completing graduate school, there are still circumstances where leaving the program can be the right move. Some people, when they weigh up the costs and benefits, question whether obtaining a PhD is worth it. In fact, even after obtaining a tenure-track job, some philosophy professors still conclude that the reward was not worth the weighty costs they incurred.

Much of the advice in this guide is based on the assumption that you are pursuing academic employment, but I devote the next part of the guide to those who want to go pursue non-academic career paths.

Part 15: Leaving Academia

The long-term goal of graduate school in philosophy is usually a permanent academic position, but even for those who begin graduate school with this aspiration, many abandon their goal of a long-term academic career. Many become disillusioned with the profession as their graduate career progresses, and others are unwilling to relocate across the country to start a new academic position. Moreover, it is simply not possible for everyone who wants a long-term academic position to obtain one: there are simply not enough jobs relative to the number of qualified candidates. In fact, the competition for jobs is so intense that decisions about who to hire are often determined by random or arbitrary factors, which means that no graduate students can be certain they will find stable academic employment. Thus, I recommend that *all* graduate students prepare for the scenario in which they do not obtain academic employment.

Despite the commonness with which graduate students in philosophy pursue careers outside the profession, these instances are often perceived as a type of failure. That's why choices to leave academia are often described as instances of "quitting" or "giving up." I have criticized this viewpoint before,[176] and my position has not changed: I do not think choosing to leave academia should be characterized as a disappointing decision. There can be good reasons for pursuing non-academic careers and even for discontinuing your graduate studies. Unfortunately, due to the sunk costs associated with getting a PhD, many people choose not to stop going for the doctorate even when they desperately want to abandon that pursuit.[177]

With this in mind, I should still stress that having a bad semester – or even a bad year – in graduate school is usually not cause for concern, even if that stretch is a particularly gloomy one. If what's making graduate school unpleasant is disconnected from your core graduate experience (e.g., a death in your family, recovering from a recent divorce, social isolation tied to the COVID-19 pandemic), then you should expect that things will get better with time. Similarly, if you just had an unusually unproductive semester, that's nothing to worry about if your prior semesters have been better. As my dissertation advisor reminded me more than once, you may well produce work in a peak-and-valley structure rather than at a steady rate, so less-than-stellar semesters will happen occasionally.

A bigger cause for concern is when the source of your unhappiness is tightly connected to your academic pursuits. If you are starting to despise your research or your teaching, then your unhappiness may not be temporary. Even tenure may not be a cure for this malady: a significant

---

[176] This perspective has also been criticized in the sciences. See this commentary in *Nature* and this article in *Scientific American*. For some discussion of how philosophy departments can help support non-academic career paths, see Kevin Zollman's "Supporting Non-Academic Careers."

[177] This ambivalent attitude toward the PhD – wanting to stop but feeling too attached to its attainment to do so – is captured nicely in Caden Steele's "Too Far Along."

number of tenured professors become unhappy with their jobs but are unable or unwilling to change careers.[178] If you despise your day-to-day routine, then it may be time for a change.

Unfortunately, most professors have little experience pursuing non-academic careers and will not be able to offer much guidance in this regard. That means that your preparation for a non-academic career will be a mostly independent endeavor. On the bright side, as PhDs have developed an increased need for information about non-academic careers, various online resources have emerged to aid academics in their pursuits outside the academy. I have compiled some of them below, though this list is far from comprehensive:

- The APA's Beyond Academia Network
- Versatile PhD
- Imagine PhD
- The Scholarpreneur
- Phil Skills
- Free Range Philosophers
- Post-Ac Posts on The Professor Is In
- Alt-Ac Job Posts on the Philosophers' Cocoon
- Alt-Ac Workshop Posts on the Philosophers' Cocoon
- Marcus Arvan's Directory of Philosophers in Industry
- Helen De Cruz on Opting for a Non-Academic Career
- Discussion of non-academic career prospects at Leiter Reports
- Amy Berg on Preparing for a Plan B While in Grad School
- Aaron Kagan on How to Shawshank Your Way Out of Academia
- John Protevi on Pursuing Alt-Ac Options Early in One's Graduate Career

Some of these resources provide guidance on how one can pursue a non-academic career while others illustrate how particular individuals pursued their own careers. You may notice that there is no clear pattern among career choice here, which highlights just how unique and idiosyncratic non-academic job searches can be. Even so, the odds are favorable that you can find a career other than being a professor that is still fulfilling. There are tons of careers, and if you are smart enough to get to the tail end of graduate school, then you are smart enough to find a suitable career outside the academy. Doing so may require marketing your skills in new ways and a willingness to start at an entry-level job that you could have had prior to your graduate studies.[179] But don't let that discourage you: your combination of intelligence, education, and work ethic may well enable you to rise up the ranks far more quickly than your co-workers.

---

[178] For one examination of this phenomenon in the humanities, see William Pannapacker's "Tenured, Trapped, and Miserable in the Humanities."

[179] Entire books have been written addressing strategies for moving from an academic career trajectory to a non-academic one. For two recent examples, see *"So What Are You Going to Do with That?": Finding Careers Outside Academia* by Susan Basalla and Maggie Debelius and *Leaving Academia: A Practical Guide* by Christopher L. Caterine.

Beyond the online resources I have mentioned above, you should also investigate the resources available at your university's career center. The quality of their assistance can vary dramatically depending on your university, but they will usually offer one-on-one career consultations where you can get advice on career exploration and the workings of the non-academic hiring process. Additionally, most career centers host periodic workshops on various aspects of the non-academic job search, such as how to format a resume or how to prepare for the common questions asked in interviews. It's worth at least examining their website or subscribing to their monthly email (if they have one) that keeps you updated on events they are running.

A long-term academic career is not for everyone, and you should not despair if you lose interest in finishing your degree midway through graduate school. Obviously, you will need to venture beyond the material found in this guide to identify a fulfilling career in another profession and obtain such a job, but I hope the resources provided in this section can aid you in those efforts.

Part 16: Final Thoughts

At this point, I have covered all the major aspects of graduate school in philosophy. There is certainly more to say about many of these subjects, but I will leave you to consult additional resources about those items on your own. Nevertheless, before concluding, I will share a few general thoughts that didn't quite fit anywhere else in the guide. Some of them are based on aspects my own time as a graduate student where things did not go as planned.

First, <u>always keep the big picture in mind</u>. As I stressed with respect to the 5-Year Plan, preparing for the future plays a pivotal role in your success in graduate school. But keeping the bigger picture in mind is not just about having a long-term plan. It also means not dwelling too much on the day-to-day ups and downs. Graduate school lasts a long time. There are always opportunities to recover from a bad day (or week or month), and by the same token, achievements tend to be relatively short-lived. Focusing obsessively on every item on your to-do list can quickly turn graduate school into an emotional roller coaster – a recurring pattern of dismay and elation, depending on how the week goes. Since rejection and criticism is more common than success, this outlook will probably lead to more frustration than joy. The better strategy is to evaluate your progress in long-term intervals. Consider taking stock of how things are going every 4–6 months.

Second, <u>be yourself</u>. Do not try to craft a professional persona that is radically different from who you really are, and do not be overly concerned with appearing weird or strange to others in the profession. Philosophers are very tolerant of weird things – in fact, many of them have built their entire careers around investigating weird things. An attempt to present yourself as some alter ego will probably come across as fake or insincere, anyway.

Third, <u>show gratitude to those who help you</u>. None of us succeed in the profession all by our lonesome. Remember those who help you on your journey and thank them from time to time.

Fourth, <u>keep an open mind</u>. I suppose this could apply to life as a philosopher generally, but in this context, I am specifically referring to advice about graduate school. As thorough as I have tried to be in this guide, you should not regard it as the sole authority on how to approach your graduate studies. In fact, if you have read all the preceding sections, I would be surprised if you endorsed all the advice I presented. That's perfectly fine: one of your major tasks as a graduate student will be evaluating the vast array of advice you will receive from your peers, professors, and others in the profession. Much of this advice will conflict, and ultimately, you will have to make your own judgments about what strategies are best for your circumstances. My hope is that by thinking about all the subjects covered in this guide, you will know more about graduate school than you did before and will be better prepared for the challenges that await. Good luck with the rest of your academic journey.

Appendix A: Should You Go to Graduate School in Philosophy?[180]

Suppose you've become intrigued by philosophy and are considering whether to study the subject at the graduate level. You would be able to spend several years studying an interesting subject and could potentially attain a job where you read, write, and teach about it as a full-time job. That sounds like a good deal in the abstract, but would it really live up to that expectation?

Discussions about what advice to provide undergraduates pondering graduate education in philosophy resurface pretty frequently in the profession. Some views on this subject can be found on The Philosophers' Cocoon, on Michael Huemer's personal website, on Bleeding Heart Libertarians, and on plenty of other sites if you're willing to dig through the search results. The issue of whether it's wise to go to graduate school also surfaces from time to time in discussions about the humanities in general. Some will recap dreadful graduate school experiences and outright discourage you from pursuing a graduate degree in the humanities. Even the occasional balanced treatment of the topic usually carries an undertone of grimness and acknowledges the harsh reality of the academic job market. Moreover, securing a tenure-track position and getting tenure does not always translate to being happy with one's academic career or life more generally.

There is some evidence that professional philosophers have mixed opinions about whether it is a good idea to pursue a career as a professional philosopher. But overall, since the job market is so tough and the attrition rate in graduate programs so high, there's a fairly strong case for discouraging students from pursuing graduate study in our discipline. In other words, if someone asks whether they should go to graduate school in philosophy, the default answer they should receive is *no*: only in rare circumstances should they be advised otherwise.

So what students qualify for these rare circumstances? The first time I wrote about this issue, I largely echoed the criteria that Eric Schwitzgebel put forward in the opening post of his series on applying to graduate school in philosophy. He writes:

> I advise students not to consider graduate school in philosophy unless (1.) they'd be happy teaching philosophy at a low prestige college and are willing to move almost anywhere in the country, and (2.) even if they never finished the degree they would have found the process of studying philosophy at the graduate level *intrinsically worthwhile*.

I read this advice for the first time in 2009 – when I was considering whether to apply to graduate school myself. I still believe that his second condition is the most important question for prospective graduate students to ask themselves.

---

[180] This material is an updated version of the blog post "Should You Go to Graduate School in Philosophy? (Revisited)" that appeared on *The Philosophers' Cocoon* in 2017.

No one – no matter what program they are admitted to and no matter how brilliant they may be – is so special that they are guaranteed to finish their degree and get a tenure-track job. Not under current circumstances, at least. In fact, the majority of graduate students fail to land tenure-track positions. Because of this dreary reality, would-be graduate students need to ask themselves the following question: **"Would the experience of studying philosophy for many years be worth it even if I did not finish the program or find permanent academic employment?"** If the answer is anything other than yes, then I think going to graduate school is unwise. Admittedly, it may be difficult for some people considering grad school in philosophy – especially those who are still undergraduates – to be confident in their answer to this question, but you have to make a serious effort to answer it nonetheless. It's too important to neglect: if you go through graduate school with an urgent need for a stable career at the end of the journey, you are likely to end up disheartened and frustrated.

Now let's suppose you answer this first question in the affirmative – you think the grad school experience will be worth it even if things go unfavorably for you sometime during the program or during your time on the job market. The next question to ask – one that I did not consider when I was contemplating whether to go to graduate school – is this: "**Do I deeply enjoy writing philosophy?**" Like the previous question, if you cannot answer this one with a sincere yes, then I think going to graduate school is unwise. A deep enjoyment of writing philosophy doesn't require that you love every part of the process or that you wake up every day with a desperate need to engage in the activity. Rather, I'm referring to a desire that underpins a steadfast interest and commitment. The prospect of writing philosophy on a consistent basis needs to be something that you find appealing.

If you enjoy reading philosophy or talking philosophy, that's great. But what really matters to your long-term success in graduate school is whether you will <u>write</u> philosophy. You will be writing multiple term papers every semester that you are taking courses. If your aim is to be competitive on the job market, then you will be revising some of these papers for a long time after initially completing them. You will present shorter versions of these papers at conferences and prepare some of them for publication (often after many revisions are made based on the feedback you receive). Even after all that, you may have to [keep submitting a paper to journals for years](#) to secure a publication. You may have to write a Master's Thesis, and you will most likely have to write a dissertation.[181] Then, if you finish graduate school and find a tenure-track position, your ability to achieve tenure (should you land a tenure-track job) will often hinge in part on your ability to produce publishable research.

Now you might think that you enjoy writing philosophy enough that this doesn't sound all that bad. But let's test that hypothesis a little. Imagine the following scenario:

---

[181] Some programs do allow for a collection of "star papers" to substitute for a traditional dissertation. If you get admitted to such a program and can get your committee to approve that project, then you can bypass the book-length dissertation. In the majority of programs in North America, however, you will not have the option to substitute papers for a full dissertation manuscript.

It's Friday night. Earlier in the day, you taught two discussion sections and attended a talk in your department given by a distinguished guest speaker. In between these events, you read an article for one of next week's seminar meetings and graded a few papers. You've had your eye on a call for papers for a regional conference with a keynote in one of your major research areas. The deadline is 5:00 pm tomorrow.

Just then you receive a text message to join a few other graduate students for drinks. You decline the invitation and spend the evening revising a recent term paper so that you have something suitable to submit to this conference. Although it takes you all night and most of Saturday, you send off an email to the conference organizers at 4:30 pm with your paper and abstract attached.

How do you react to reading this anecdote? Does this sort of weekend sound dreadful? Tolerable? Pleasant? If you don't think that you would like to do this sort of thing on the weekend, then grad school in philosophy is probably not the best thing for you. (I'm not saying you would have to do this every weekend, but if you're going to engage in the professional development necessary to be successful, then similar situations will arise with some regularity.)

Your commitment to philosophical writing must be stable and powerful. If it isn't, then you will likely abandon this commitment at some point in your graduate career. There will be moments where you will be sorely tempted to neglect your writing, and if you don't enjoy this part of doing philosophy, you will be more likely to succumb to this temptation. Should that happen, you may not have the publication record needed to be a competitive job candidate, or you may not finish your dissertation.

If you're the sort of person who writes philosophy just for fun or for your own intellectual enrichment, then you might well have a deep enough interest in writing philosophy to enjoy your time as a graduate student and be reasonably successful at the end of it. In contrast, if you need to be "forced" to write philosophy (e.g., by term paper deadlines, by pressure from your professors), then the odds are good that graduate school will ultimately turn into stress and toil for you.

Thus far, I've identified what I consider the two most crucial questions to ask when considering graduate school in philosophy. What else should be considered when making this decision? Schwitzgebel identifies two other important factors (which he lumps together into a single condition): whether you would enjoy a teaching-oriented position at a low-prestige college and whether you are geographically flexible with your life plans. These should both be taken into account, and I think at least five other factors warrant consideration as well: the placement record of the institution you plan to attend, your funding situation at the institution you plan to attend, your family plans, your intended area of specialization, and your ability to handle criticism.

How should each of these factors affect your decision about whether to go to graduate school? Well, let's break them down in a bit more detail.

▪ **Would you be happy with a teaching position at a low-prestige college?**

Not all jobs in philosophy are teaching-oriented positions, but most of them are. If the answer to this question is no, then it's going to be a lot more difficult to find an academic job that would enable you to have a fulfilling career.

▪ **Would you be willing to relocate far away from where you currently live to find a suitable job in academic philosophy?**

If you meet the very first condition that I discussed, then your decision to attend grad school in philosophy does not hinge entirely on whether you can get a permanent academic position in the field. But most likely, you would *prefer* to get such a position. Greater geographic flexibility means a larger pool of jobs that you will be able to apply for. Of course, very few of us are willing to relocate anywhere in the world, but the pickier you are regarding the region of the world that you would like to live in, the more limited you will be in what jobs you can apply for every year.

▪ **Does the institution you plan to attend have a strong placement record?**

Like the previous consideration, this is only relevant if you would prefer long-term academic employment. If so, then your institution's placement record should factor into your decision. How often to people with PhDs from this institution get tenure-track jobs, and are the kinds of jobs they tend to get ones that would be acceptable to you?

Note here that I am emphasizing placement record rather than prestige. This runs counter to a claim that I was told many times when I was considering whether to go to graduate school in philosophy: "You should only go to graduate school if you get into a program that is in the top 25 of the [Philosophical Gourmet Rankings](#)." (The ranking number can vary depending on who is asked; the first time I heard this, I was told not to go to any programs outside the top 50.) I am not convinced that this advice is sound.

The assumption is that going to a low-prestige program puts you at such a disadvantage on the job market. Admittedly, there is [some evidence](#) that where you get your PhD affects your job market prospects, and placement record often correlates with the prestige of a program. That is not a universal rule, though. Some schools that are unranked according to the Philosophical Gourmet report have surprisingly good placement records, and some ranked programs do not have great placement records. Thus, I don't think it is sound advice to look exclusively at a program's ranking to determine your likelihood of being able to get a job with a PhD from that institution.

▪ **Have you secured a funding package from the institution to which you have been admitted? And will the stipend be sufficient to cover your living expenses?**

Getting a PhD in philosophy takes a lot of time (usually 6–8 years and perhaps longer if your time in graduate school spans multiple institutions), and the stipends associated with work as a teaching assistant are usually pretty meager. Given the opportunity costs

involved in getting the degree and the uncertain career prospects, you really don't want to be racking up debt during graduate school. If you do not secure any funding, I would advise reapplying in the following fall semester and hoping for better results.

If you secure funding but will not be able to make ends meet with the stipend alone, then this is a strike against accepting the offer. Everyone has to meet their basic needs, and so you'll be incentivized to either adjunct at nearby institutions (which will reduce the amount of time that you can devote to your graduate studies) or take out loans. Neither is an ideal option.

- **Are you single or in a relationship? If you are single, do you hope to start a long-term relationship during graduate school? Do you have any children? Do you plan to have any children during graduate school?**

One thing you need to consider before going to graduate school is how doing so would fit with your broader life plans. Attending a graduate program usually requires relocating at least once to start your program and probably a few more times if you seek long-term academic employment. If you have a family, is it feasible to uproot them this many times to pursue an academic career? Will doing so impede your partner's ability to find and maintain a satisfactory job? If you have or plan to have children, do you think you'll be able to be both the kind of parent and the kind of graduate student you want to be?

Starting a family or staying involved with the one you have already established is not incompatible with being a productive graduate student, but it does pose some additional challenges. It's [tough to balance parenthood and an academic life](#).[182] And unfortunately, this balancing act is [likely to be more difficult for mothers than fathers](#). It can be done, of course, as many people in academia regularly demonstrate, but you will need to consider whether the sacrifices that academic life may require are compatible with how you prioritize spending time with your family.

- **What is your intended area of specialization?**

Your area of specialization matters a lot to your employment prospects. Why? Because [some areas of specialization have more job openings than others](#). The current trend in the profession is that jobs in ethics, political philosophy, and philosophy of science are more common than most other AOSs, and jobs in the "core" areas of philosophy – epistemology, metaphysics, and language – are less common. Jobs in ethics, applied ethics, and political philosophy are likely to remain in higher demand than other areas of philosophy because undergraduate course offerings in these areas are much more common than offerings in most other areas. In some cases, your area of specialization may be far more important to your chances of employment than your institution of origin. (A person from an unranked program with an AOS in ethics, for example, may well have

---

[182] For a particularly poignant example, see Nandini Pandey's "[Not Bringing Home a Baby](#)."

a much better shot at a tenure-track job than a person from a distinguished program whose AOS is metaphysics.) So, one thing you should consider is what the employment prospects are like in your intended AOS.

Of course, one caveat is that people's interests can change during graduate school. There's no guarantee that your intended AOS will remain the same during your many years of graduate school, and given the difficulties presented by writing the dissertation, you do not want to try to write one in a subject area you aren't passionate about just to increase your probability of employment when you finish. That's a recipe for dropping out at the ABD stage, and even if you do finish the dissertation, you'd then be applying for jobs where you would teach and/or research in an area you weren't deeply interested in. All that said, you've got to decide whether to go to graduate school based on whatever information is at your disposal, so assume some level of consistency in your interests when you make this decision.

- **Will you be able to persevere despite abundant criticism?**

  Throughout graduate school and professional life, your work will be criticized frequently by your professors and by peer reviewers for journals and conferences. Your teaching will be assessed – sometimes harshly – by both your professors and your students. If you attempt to publish papers or present at conferences, your work will often be rejected. If you apply for academic jobs, you will see dozens – maybe even hundreds – of rejection notices enter your email inbox.

  If you are going to enjoy graduate school and professional life, you have to be able to receive this criticism and rejection without becoming distraught or frustrated. Succeeding in the profession requires a thick skin and a willingness to persevere. It is possible to develop this disposition during your graduate studies, but it is preferable to have already developed some tolerance for criticism before you begin your graduate studies.

With all this information presented, we can now sort these questions into a relatively simple decision procedure.

1. **Would the experience of studying philosophy for many years be worth it even if you did not finish the program or find permanent academic employment?**

   If yes, proceed to question 2; otherwise, you should not apply to graduate school in philosophy. (Answers like "maybe" or "I don't know" do not count as "yes" answers.

2. **Do you deeply enjoy writing philosophy?**

   If yes, proceed to items 3–9; otherwise, you should not apply to graduate school in philosophy. (Answers like "sort of" or "I don't know" do not count as "yes" answers.)

3. **Would you be happy with a teaching position at a low-prestige college?**

4. **Would you be willing to relocate far away from where you currently live to find a suitable job in academic philosophy?**

5. **Does the institution you plan to attend have a strong placement record?**

6. **Have you secured a funding package from the institution to which you have been admitted? And will the stipend be sufficient to cover your living expenses?**

7. **Are you single or in a relationship? If you are single, do you hope to start a long-term relationship during graduate school? Do you have any children? Do you plan to have any children during graduate school?**

8. **What is your intended area of specialization?**

9. **Will you be able to persevere despite abundant criticism?**

In my view, no particular answer in 3–9 offer a decisive reason against going to graduate school in philosophy (though I think failure to gain funding to a program where one is admitted comes very close). But these questions can generate "red flags" that should carry weight in your deliberations. If you aren't willing to take a teaching job, then that's a red flag; if you aren't willing to move too far from home, that's a red flag; if your intended AOS is metaphysics, that's a red flag.

I don't think there's a magic number of red flags that make it unwise for a person to go to graduate school (provided that questions 1 and 2 have been answered in the affirmative), and they can be mitigated by other factors. For example, an intended AOS in metaphysics shouldn't carry as much weight in your decision regarding whether to pursue graduate studies if you can gain admission to NYU or if you don't care at all about academic employment. But fewer red flags will usually result in a higher probability of personal enjoyment during graduate school and professional success afterward.

One concern about making these assessments is that [graduate school can be a transformative experience](). Such experiences can significantly alter your values or preferences. It is difficult to gauge how to make decisions about transformative experiences because one can be mistaken about how one will feel after the transformation has occurred. A prospective mother, for instance, might be unable to accurately anticipate what being a parent is like until actually having a child of her own. Similarly, a prospective graduate student might be mistaken in thinking that they will be satisfied with getting the PhD even if they are unable to land a tenure-track job: perhaps they will come to value to the tenure-track job more as their graduate studies progress and they become more immersed in professional life. The opposite could also occur: someone could come to feel that their graduate studies were valuable regardless of their employment prospects despite not feeling that way when they began their graduate studies. This concern may lead one to worry that it is not possible to make a rational decision about whether to go to graduate school because there is uncertainty about whether a prospective graduate student will

have the same values in several years later that they had when they were making the decision to accept an offer of admission.

Concerns about the transformational aspects of graduate school are understandable, and I suspect that graduate school will be transformative for some graduate students. Even so, it will not be transformative for everyone. Furthermore, I believe there are sufficient commonalities among graduate students' experiences for prospective students to make reasonably informed judgments about whether graduate school is reasonable for them to pursue. Undergraduates also usually have opportunities (e.g., enrolling in grad courses, presenting at undergraduate conferences, serving as an undergraduate assistant for a course) to get exposure to some of the features of graduate student life. Doing so can make it easier for them to assess whether graduate school would be an enjoyable experience for them.

In any case, whether or not you agree with every facet of the procedure, deliberating about these questions should put you in a better position to determine whether graduate school in philosophy is right for you. And if you are ultimately still unsure what to do, my recommendation in that case would be <u>not</u> to go to graduate school in philosophy. Because of substantial investment it takes to get a PhD and the uncertain employment prospects afterward, the default position should be <u>not</u> to go to graduate school in philosophy. Only those who can make a plausible case that graduate school will be rewarding for them should seriously consider pursuing it. My hope is that the 9 considerations I have outlined will help you determine whether you belong in the rare group of people that should go after a PhD in philosophy.

Appendix B: Applying to Graduate School in Philosophy

This appendix is an updated version of [a guide that I originally wrote in 2011](#). The main advice has not changed much, but some sections have been updated to reflect new developments in the profession and changes in the application process.

A Note about Graduate School Admissions

I already discussed what you should consider when applying to graduate school in philosophy in the [prior appendix](#). However, there are two other things that you should know before you start filling out applications. First, admissions to philosophy programs are extremely competitive. Even the very best students from the most prestigious undergraduate institutions (e.g., Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford) often struggle to gain admission to the most prestigious graduate programs. Although gaining admission to less prestigious schools can be easier, the task remains difficult. To be competitive for admission to any graduate program in philosophy, expect to need at least 3.8 undergraduate GPA and an overall GRE score of 310 in the quantitative and verbal sections.[183] You will also need three excellent letters of recommendation and an exemplary writing sample. Of course, even if you provide all these things, you may still be denied admission to graduate programs, including those of lower prestige.

Second, the application process requires significant investments of time and money. In order to have a reasonable chance of gaining admission to a program with a decent funding offer, you will need to apply to many programs. The costs will vary depending on what the university and philosophy department require, but the total costs for materials should average $100–130 per program.[184] Every application will also require a significant amount of time to complete. Many aspects of each application will be the same, but the process is still tedious and can quickly become frustrating.

Selecting Schools

This section includes information about the differences between MA programs and PhD programs and methods for identifying what programs you should apply to.

MA Programs or PhD Programs?

In the United States, an MA is not required to apply to PhD programs in philosophy. Typically, students admitted directly into PhD programs will acquire an MA along their way to the

---

[183] In the prior version of this guide, I suggested that the minimum target GRE score was 1250, but the exam scoring format has changed substantially since then. On the old scoring system, the best possible cumulative score was 1600; that total is now 340. You can read more about interpreting your score [here](#).

[184] Application fees vary dramatically across institutions, but transcript and GRE costs are pretty consistent. Each transcript request will be about $10. Taking the GRE costs $220 everywhere except China (where it is $231.30), and that includes 4 score reports you can distribute immediately after taking the test. Additional score reports cost $35 each.

doctorate. Some departments do not feature a doctoral program but will confer a terminal MA Most terminal MA programs are structured to aid students in applying to doctoral programs and continuing their philosophical education at another institution.

It is virtually impossible to find permanent employment in academic philosophy without a PhD in the field, so if you desire an academic career in philosophy, merely earning an MA is not a reasonable goal. If you are studying philosophy as preparation for something else (such as law school), then attaining an MA (and only an MA) may be sensible. Otherwise, an MA should serve as a prelude to doctoral studies. Naturally, this means that the best MA programs to consider are those that strive to place their MA recipients into distinguished PhD programs.

Many philosophy departments have both MA and PhD programs, but their MA programs are rarely designed to move students into more prestigious PhD programs. It should also be noted that some departments with PhD programs might prefer to have you begin with their MA program. However, if your real interest is in the PhD, make this clear in your application. Also clarify whether these departments grant priority to current MA students regarding eventual admission into the PhD program. Some programs will give priority to excellent MA students, but this preferential treatment is far from guaranteed. Consequently, when applying to MA programs with the goal of eventually attaining a PhD, you should generally choose departments that do not have doctoral programs.

Applicants have varying motives for applying to MA programs instead of PhD programs. Here are the most common reasons:

1. **They are not confident of gaining admission to a PhD program and are applying to an MA program as a safety school.** While this strategy seems sensible, many MA programs are actually more competitive than PhD programs with regard to both the number and quality of the applicants. In general, avoid applying to MA programs as safety schools.
2. **They want to improve their chances of gaining admission to a better (or more prestigious) PhD program.** This strategy can be understandable sometimes, but it remains a considerable gamble in most cases. An MA program will give you more preparation for a PhD program, but your academic performance, work habits, writing ability, and GRE scores will be what earn you a place in a program. Even an MA from a prestigious school offers no guarantee of admission to any PhD program. Furthermore, the top programs are so competitive that even those with the most exceptional academic records still have fairly low probabilities of being admitted.
3. **They lack a background in philosophy sufficient to gain admission into the PhD programs they desire.** Compared to most PhD programs, MA programs are more willing to admit students with a limited philosophical background. Earning an MA in philosophy ensures that these students will not be rejected from PhD programs in the future because they lack a comprehensive education in philosophy. MA programs may also suitably

orient these students to graduate study in philosophy so that they do not feel overwhelmed when they enter doctoral programs.

Among these common reasons for applying to MA programs, only lack of a philosophical background offers a compelling reason to do so. Applying to an MA program as a safety school is unrealistic, and applying in the hope of later being admitted to a better PhD program is risky.[185] If applying to MA programs still sounds reasonable to you, be sure to also give these factors some consideration:

- **MA programs have less funding than PhD programs.** Depending on your background and the program, your chances of being admitted to an MA program may be higher, but your chances of acquiring a teaching assistantship and tuition waiver will probably be lower, unless it is understood that you aim to stay for the PhD
- **Acquiring an MA and a PhD from separate institutions will hinder your progress toward the doctorate.** If you transfer to a PhD program after getting an MA at a different institution, you will almost always be required to complete a minimum of one year of additional coursework before starting your dissertation. In some cases, the extra requirements could even set you back 2–3 years.[186]
- **You will need to complete the application process all over again.** MA programs typically last for only two years, meaning that you will begin reapplying to graduate schools in the fall semester of your second year in the program. The department will help you to some degree, but this time, you will have to complete the applications while taking graduate courses and (usually) fulfilling your teaching duties. These obstacles may make the application process harder than it was the first time.[187]

Even with these difficulties in mind, there are circumstances where applying to terminal MA programs is reasonable, but applying to PhD programs is often a better idea, especially for undergraduate philosophy majors and others who do not have deficiencies in their philosophical background.

---

[185] Since writing the first version of this guide, it has become more common for graduate students admitted to PhD programs to enter with Master's degrees. That trend suggests that this strategy is not as risky as it used to be, but there's still no guarantee that you will end up in a notably better PhD program than you would have been admitted to otherwise. If adopting this strategy, it may also be helpful to prioritize applying to the MA programs that fare the best in placing graduate students into good PhD programs. Gil Hersch's "The Philosophical GourMA" is perhaps the best resource on this topic.

[186] Aspiring graduate students should also be mindful of the opportunity costs associated with extending their time to degree. Additional years of graduate school are additional years living on poverty-level wages. Graduating earlier means earning a living wage sooner and (hopefully) paying off your debts more quickly. After all, even 1-year positions are likely to pay more than double what you earn on a graduate student stipend. I thank David Reidy for bringing these considerations to my attention.

[187] In a previous version of this guide, I noted that some admissions committees viewed applicants with MA degrees negatively because many terminal MA programs in the past did not focus on preparing students for PhD programs. However, since it is now commonplace for students to enter PhD programs only after acquiring an MA at another institution, I no longer think this negative attitude toward MA students is widely held.

The Philosophical Gourmet Report

The Philosophical Gourmet Report (PGR) is a ranking list of PhD programs in the English-speaking world. The report features contributions from many philosophers, but it is currently edited by Christopher Pynes and Berit Brogaard.[188] The rankings are based upon how other philosophers – namely those on the PGR advisory board – perceive the scholarly work of the philosophy faculty at other universities. The PGR also features specialty rankings. In these rankings, programs are ordered in a tier system based on how experts in the given specialty area (e.g., philosophy of language, applied ethics, philosophy of mind) perceive the faculties of other programs with regard to that specialty area.

Most philosophy professors will advise you to check PGR to determine what programs you should apply to. Many professors will recommend only applying to programs ranked in the top 50 of the overall rankings, others will advise you to limit your selection to the top 25, and some will recommend that you look for schools in the top 50 that are also strong in your specialty area. Certain professors will give the specialty rankings greater weight than others, but generally, the specialty rankings are not considered as important as the overall rankings. Hence, some professors will not recommend applying to an unranked program even when it is strong in your areas of interest. However, Leiter does mention some special circumstances (e.g., strongly wanting to study ancient philosophy) where the specialty rankings may be of greater importance than overall rankings, and many other philosophers have offered their thoughts on the subject as comments on his blog.

PGR has had a significant influence on professional philosophy and the perceived value of one's degree by other philosophers, and it remains the most elaborate ranking of graduate programs that exists in the profession at present. As a result, a student who is admitted to a top 25 program with full funding would generally need a fairly compelling reason to decline the offer in favor of a school ranked more than a few spots lower. Nevertheless, despite its importance, the PGR should not be considered the sole authority on where students ought to apply.

The Limits of the Philosophical Gourmet Report

The ranking system in PGR is essentially a measure of perceived prestige of philosophy programs. The rankings are generated by a collection of subjective evaluations about the quality of philosophical research being done at a given institution. While the methods of achieving this information have been refined over the years, PGR still has a considerable number of limitations:

1. Although the correlation between a program's perceived prestige and the quality of its program is generally thought to be positive, there will be exceptions, and the extent of this correlation remains unclear.

---

[188] In the past, PGR was sometimes referred to as the "Leiter Report" because it was originally edited by Brian Leiter, a law professor at the University of Chicago.

2. Evaluators cannot possibly know the quality of the research of every member of other philosophy departments. Therefore, the surveys used to produce the rankings cannot be completely accurate.
3. The quality of a faculty member's research does not necessarily have any relation to his or her teaching ability or commitment to educating graduate students.
4. Programs' placement rates have no impact on the rankings.
5. The Leiter Report has an obvious bias toward larger departments.

Most of these criticisms originate from this short write-up by Richard Heck.[189] It's worth being aware of how PGR's rankings are produced and the potential flaws associated with the process. Furthermore, there has been some recent discussion of the link between the PGR ranking and job placement that is worth highlighting.

According to the Academic Placement Data and Analysis: 2017 Final Report, which was funded in part by the American Philosophical Association, a significant number of unranked programs actually do pretty well at placing their graduates into tenure-track positions. There were some documented problems with the reports' findings, primarily because all temporary positions were grouped together and many distinguished schools place their graduate students into exceptional post-docs that later turn into tenure-track positions at distinguished universities. Additionally, schools ranked high in the PGR did tend to fare better than other programs when it came to placing their graduates in research-oriented positions.

Despite its faults, the report (and more recent data collected) does provide compelling evidence that many programs with low rankings in the PGR (and even some that are not ranked at all) are generally successful in helping their graduates find permanent academic employment. Thus, if your primary goal is to find a job in philosophy, then some of these programs may be better choices than their more distinguished counterparts. If you want the best chance possible to find a research position, then following PGR is still probably the way to go.

Another consideration in where you go to graduate school is where you may rank among your cohort of graduate students. Since letters of recommendation play a role in the job application process, having letters that identify you as, say, "the best graduate student from the 2025 class" or "the best graduate student I have taught during my 30-year career" are better than letters that identify you as just an above-average graduate student in the program or one of the 10 best students a professor has taught.[190] Of course, it can be hard to know how you will compare to the other graduate students in your cohort, but this does provide a reason to go to a program where you can excel rather than automatically going to a program that is more highly ranked.

---

[189] Heck has also compiled some other recent discussions of issues with the PGR on this webpage. For some more recent criticisms of the PGR and discussion, see "What's Wrong with Rankings?: 1. A Measuring Cup is a Poor Ruler" by Sam Duncan.

[190] I thank Jon Garthoff for presenting this point to me.

One other limitation of the PGR should also be acknowledged: it skews heavily toward analytic philosophy. That is not surprising since analytic philosophy is by far the dominant tradition at most universities, but students who want to focus on studying continental philosophy may want to consult other resources.[191] The Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy provides a list of programs that are "interested in, supportive of, or specializing in continental philosophy." It was also once possible to consult The Pluralist's Guide to Philosophy Programs for recommendations about graduate programs where students could study continental philosophy, but The Pluralist's Guide is no longer current or regularly updated.

Other Preliminary Research

After consulting the PGR and developing a tentative list of schools, visit the websites for each program, and see which ones seem to suit your interests. Look for special features of the program and recent events that the department has sponsored. Visit the faculty pages, and see what they are currently researching. Consult the program's graduate handbook to learn more about the course offerings, the distribution requirements, and the duties of teaching assistants. Consider where the program is located and whether you would enjoy living there for several years. Email graduate students or faculty members at the university with questions about the program if there are details that your other research has not uncovered, and do not forget to consult your professors for advice. The philosophical community is smaller than you think, and you may be surprised by how much your professors know about the programs you are considering and the faculty members in those departments.

Since originally writing this guide, Lindsay Whittaker started maintaining a detailed Google spreadsheet with information about graduate programs in philosophy – details like their application deadlines, application fees, whether they require the GRE, and so on. If you want an overview of how various graduate programs compare to one another along these parameters, you should absolutely read this document.

Above all other things, be sure to check the job placement rates of the schools you are considering. As I noted in the previous section, prestigious schools do not always have exceptional placement rates, and many unranked schools place their program graduates surprisingly well. If a program has poor placement rates or its placement information is not available online, this fact alone may be a sufficient reason not to apply there.

How Many Schools?

In some fields, aspiring graduate students only apply to 3 or 4 schools, but if you want to have a decent chance of getting admitted to good graduate program in philosophy with a funding package, you will need to apply more. When I was applying to graduate school in 2009, the most common recommendation I received was to apply to between 8 and 12 schools. In the time since

---

[191] If you're unfamiliar with the distinction between continental and analytic philosophy, a concise overview of this divide can be found on this webpage.

then, norms have changed: it is now common for people to apply to between 15 and 20 schools.[192] Theoretically, it would be better to apply to even more schools, but there is a limit to the number of high-quality applications you can submit with limited time and money. I believe 15 applications is manageable for most aspiring graduate students, but I would caution against applying to many more than that.

Preparing and Submitting the Required Materials

Once you have selected your schools, you must complete the tedious process of preparing applications and submitting all the required materials. For each program, expect to submit these items: GRE scores, transcripts, an application form, three letters of recommendation, a resume or curriculum vitae, a personal statement, and a writing sample of 15–20 pages.

The GRE

The Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) general test is a standardized test designed to evaluate verbal skills, mathematical knowledge, and writing ability. There are GRE subject tests in a variety of fields but not in philosophy. Most graduate programs in philosophy, whether an MA or PhD program, require submission of your general test scores.

The GRE general test features three distinct parts: a verbal section, a quantitative section, and an analytical writing section. The verbal and quantitative sections are scored on scale from 130–170 in 10-point increments, and the analytical writing section is scored on a scale from 0–6 in 0.5-point increments.

There are plenty of resources to help you prepare for the GRE. Your goal should be (at a minimum) a cumulative score of 310 with a 5.0 on the analytical writing section. At most programs, a score below 310 will hurt your chances of admission, and a higher score will gradually improve your chances.[193] If you strive to be competitive for spots in the most prestigious programs, you have to set your sights pretty high – around 330. A perfect score is 340, and many applicants will be very close to that mark. Any score below a 5.0 on the analytical writing will definitely hurt your chances. In fact, since your graduate studies in philosophy will feature a lot of analytical writing, attaining a 5.5 or 6.0 is preferable.

The Educational Testing Services (ETS) website provides a quick means of registering for the GRE. Schedule your first test date for no later than the second week of October. The GRE can only be taken once per month. A few weeks after the test, you will receive your scores from

---

[192] See this discussion on the Philosophers' Cocoon for some anecdotes about how many programs folks have applied to in the past.

[193] Departments will vary in how much weight they give to GRE scores, but at many universities, admissions committee members want high GRE scores so that their incoming graduate students will be competitive for first-year fellowships provided across the entire campus. Administrators will not be able to evaluate your philosophical work, but they can easily compare GRE scores across applicants. That means that your GRE score can carry significant weight if you are nominated for such a fellowship.

ETS, and this way, you can take the exam a second time in November if your scores were lackluster the first time. Because ETS can take up to five business days to process requests for additional score reports, place those requests as soon as possible.

Transcripts

Your academic records cannot be altered in any way, so preparing them for submission merely entails paying the registrar a little money to mail them for you. Most programs will expect current transcripts. Hence, depending on the deadlines, you might need to wait to request transcripts for certain programs until after grades for the fall semester have been posted. Nevertheless, among all the materials, transcripts should be the simplest thing to submit.

Application Forms

Every program will have an application form that you must fill out and submit to the graduate school. The information required is generally minimal (e.g., address, ethnicity, birthday, social security number, etc.). Virtually all of these application forms will be online, so you should not need any trips to the post office to submit your materials.

Note that some programs will require more forms than others. Some require separate forms as applications for teaching assistantships and graduate fellowships while other schools nominate their best applicants for these awards without requiring any additional materials. Be aware of what each particular program requires: losing eligibility for financial aid because you forgot to submit an extra form would be tragic.

Some online application forms will have sections where you upload your personal statement and writing sample. In these circumstances, the application forms will probably be the last part of the application that you submit.

Letters of Recommendation

Submitting letters of recommendation is another relatively easy aspect of the application process. Identify three people who are familiar with your philosophical ability (preferably professors who gave you A's in their classes), and ask them if they will write letters of recommendation for you. Almost all applications will require a minimum of three letters of recommendation. Admissions committees typically receive so many applications that they prefer not to receive unnecessary letters of recommendation. As a result, some programs require that applicants submit *only* three letters of recommendation. It could be useful to have additional letters of recommendation in some circumstances, but it is certainly not a requirement. In fact, having a fourth letter that is noticeably weaker than your other three could actually hurt your chances of admission. Choose three letter writers at first, and only ask others for letters of recommendation if you are confident that they could write letters of comparable strength and could address your qualifications in a way that the other letter writers could not.

Provide your letter writers with copies of your transcripts, personal statement, and resume or curriculum vitae. They need to know as much about you as they can, and what they say needs to correspond to what you say in your personal statement. Provide them with addressed envelopes or instructions for submitting their letters online if that is what a program requires. Once you have provided these materials, leave your professors to write and submit their letters. Check back with them within a couple weeks of the first application deadline. Professors can get wrapped up in their teaching or research and forget about your letters, but a gentle, well-timed reminder will go a long way toward preventing this.

Resume or Curriculum Vitae

Not every application requires a resume or curriculum vitae (CV). Instead, many of them have sections of their application forms where applicants are instructed to list their honors and awards or provide their employment history. Before applying to programs, revise your most current resume or CV. If you have never written one, now would be a proper time to do so. Even if you do not have to submit the actual document, you will have a list of your accomplishments prepared in case you need to fill in some portion of the application form with that information.

Of all elements of the application, the content of the resume or CV may be the least important. Even your conference presentations and pertinent academic awards (e.g., 2017 Outstanding Student in Philosophy) will not mean much to most admissions committees. Nevertheless, without a solid document, you could be placed at a slight disadvantage, and should you be admitted, a strong resume or CV can help you earn an assistantship or fellowship.

You should not have much difficulty finding online resources for putting together a resume or CV, but if you still have questions or concerns, make an appointment to discuss the matter with the career development center (or equivalent) at your undergraduate institution. For these applications, the content of a resume and CV should not vary much from one to the other: You will want to stress your academic accomplishments and preparation for studying philosophy as much as possible in both documents. Length, on the other hand, may vary considerably. A CV can be any length, but a resume should be limited to one page.

Personal Statement

The personal statement, also called the statement of purpose or letter of intent, may be the most despised portion of the application. These statements are incredibly hard to write. Eric Schwitzgebel of University of California Riverside [summarizes the problem quite well](#):

> It's hard to know even what a "statement of purpose" is. Your purpose is to go to graduate school, get a PhD, and become a professor. Duh! Are you supposed to try to convince the committee that you want to become a professor more than the next guy? That philosophy is written in your genes? That you have some profound vision for the transformation of philosophy or philosophy education?

The important elements of a personal statement seem self-explanatory, and applicants often struggle to write a statement that makes them seem more deserving of admission than the other applicants. After all, how can you expect an admissions committee to think your reasons for wanting to study and teach philosophy are better than those of other applicants? In their efforts to differentiate themselves from the other aspiring graduate students, applicants often make mistakes in their personal statements. **Table 2** displays many of the common mistakes and provides examples of them.

Table 2: A list of the most common ways in which applicants' personal statements can go wrong, largely based on examples from Professor Schwitzgebel

Applicant's Remark Is…	Example
Corny	"I have pondered life's deepest mysteries since I was ten."
Brown-Nosed	"I consider Sample University the best philosophy program in the country."
Unrealistic or Arrogant	"I plan to teach philosophy at a top-ten program." (This applicant would almost surely be claiming to become a more eminent philosopher than those that are evaluating his or her application.)
Self-Important	"I will attempt to revive empiricism."
Self-Promoting	"I was always one of the best philosophy students at Random University and actively participated in every class discussion."
Ignorant	"Sample University suits my interests well because of its strengths in applied ethics." (In this example, the faculty at Sample University has strengths in metaethics, and no one specializes in applied ethics.)
Obvious	"I hope to teach philosophy someday."
Presumptuous	"I showed in my senior thesis in philosophy that Peter Singer's argument that abortion is morally permissible is undeniably sound." (Endorsing a philosophical view in a personal statement is a mistake: Admissions committees will question how the applicant can be knowledgeable enough to hold such a strong view and may view them as narrow-minded.)

These kinds of mistakes are ubiquitous and can be hard to avoid. As a result, in a blog post about this subject authored by Geoff Pynn, he suggests that the guiding principle of writing a personal statement is "Do no harm." There are many ways in which your personal statement could hurt

your chances for admission, so your top priority should be to avoid that outcome. Here are a few ways you can accomplish that.

In your statement, avoid discussing your personal accomplishments, how you came to be interested in philosophy, and the particular philosophical views you hold. Instead, focus on philosophical issues that interest you, particularly those that you have researched, and elaborate on them in a neutral manner (i.e., without explicitly endorsing any specific views). Discussing your philosophical interests will demonstrate not only how much you know about your interest areas but also enable the admissions committee to evaluate how well your areas of interest match the research interests of the faculty.

The statement of purpose is also an opportunity to explain any weaknesses or anomalies in your file, but do not do this unless it is something major that the committee will definitely notice. It would be worth taking a few sentences to explain how a medical emergency resulted in a semester of poor grades, for instance. For minor things, however, do not bother mentioning them: doing so just draws unnecessary attention to them.

The personal statement is also an opportunity to explain why this particular university appeals to you. This kind of tailoring in not strictly necessary, but if a program has some notable features you like, mentioning these things can be beneficial. Similarly, mentioning a faculty member's work that intrigues you can make you seem like a better fit for the program. However, this strategy can be risky because you could be perceived as brown-nosing, even if your interest in the professor's work is genuine.[194] Ultimately, if you tailor your personal statement to a particular program, keep these changes fairly minimal, and avoid offering excessive praise of either the program or a professor's work.

Although writing a stellar personal statement remains a daunting task even if you avoid all the mistakes mentioned earlier, bear in mind that standards for personal statements are low. Most personal statements are flawed in several ways, and the biggest thing that committee members want to know is whether your research interests match the department's strengths.

Writing Sample

Of all the application materials, the writing sample takes the longest to prepare. Revising a philosophy paper so that it becomes a solid writing sample is no easy task. Even if you received an A on the original paper, it will need substantial revision. Your goal should be to turn your current draft into an A+ paper that reaches the limits of your present philosophical ability.

Most students who apply to PhD programs will have excellent grades, excellent GRE scores, and excellent letters of recommendation, but not all of them will be able to write an excellent philosophical paper. If you can write cogent, persuasive arguments, you may be able to distinguish yourself from the rest of the applicants. Moreover, the ability to write an exceptional

---

[194] The same can also be said of reaching out to faculty members for information or advice before applying to the program where they reside, as discussed in comments on this post at the Philosophers' Cocoon.

philosophical paper usually carries more weight with the admissions committee than anything else: philosophy is about presenting and critiquing ideas through rational argument, and demonstrating a strong ability to do that will make you an ideal addition to any graduate program.

Pick a paper from a previous philosophy course (preferably one on which you earned an A) that you think could be expanded into a suitable writing sample. The topic of the paper does not matter as long as it concerns something that can be suitably evaluated by the admissions committees who will review your application. Do not, for example, submit a paper concerning philosophy of language to a department where no one works in that area of philosophy. The admissions committee may have a difficult time assessing the quality of your sample.

After selecting a paper, consult the professor who graded it. Specifically, ask if it would be a suitable writing sample and if they would be willing to help you revise it. Your professor will tell you if the paper is not suitable for a graduate school application. Be sure your professor looks at multiple drafts, and follow their advice. If possible, have another professor look at it. Professors will vary in the errors they uncover, the objections they raise, the ideas they offer to support your position, and the source material they suggest you consult. Naturally, this makes additional opinions about your paper very valuable. Moreover, if more than one professor identifies the same section of your paper as containing weak arguments or being unclear, that section indisputably needs major revision.

Expect to expand the original paper considerably, and be prepared to make at least three substantial revisions. Divide your work on the writing sample over several months. Do not attempt to transform your paper from good to exemplary in one week; you need ample time to let the ideas resonate and conduct additional research. The process will take time, but the writing sample needs to be the absolute best you can produce.

The ideal length of a writing sample is usually 15–20 double-spaced pages, but the desired length can vary slightly from one program to the next. Check the specifications for each program to be sure what they prefer. Occasionally, a program will want a writing sample that is as short as 3000 words (9–10 double-spaced pages), and this could mean crafting a separate writing sample for that program if you wish to apply there. You could try to cut your main paper down to a suitable length, but by discarding so much material, your arguments will lose a lot of their explanatory and persuasive force. To avoid this type of problem, consult the admissions requirements of the programs that interest you early, and if necessary, be prepared to write additional samples to satisfy troublesome length requirements.

Timeline of the Application Process

Table 3 illustrates a reasonable timeline for the application process. If you start the process in the first week of October, time should not be a tremendous obstacle, but starting the process earlier can be very helpful. While some programs have deadlines in mid-January and early February, others have deadlines at the beginning of January and middle of December. If you

want to apply to these programs and avoid working on your applications during finals week and winter break, starting early is your only option.

Table 3: A checklist of when you should complete certain tasks as you apply to graduate programs in philosophy.

Month	Tasks
October	€ Conduct preliminary research on graduate schools, and select a tentative list of schools. € Take the GRE. € Contact the professors who will write your letters of recommendation. € Send all your letter writers copies of your transcripts, your resume or CV, and the current draft of your personal statement. € Pick a paper to revise for your writing sample, and discuss it with the professor who will help you revise it.
November	€ Revise your list of schools as needed, and commit to applying to the schools you have selected. Beyond this point, do not add or remove schools from your list without a truly compelling reason to do so. € Contact your letter writers if they have not prepared your letters. € Retake the GRE (if needed). € Request any remaining GRE score reports. € Make the first and second rounds of revisions on your writing sample. € Request transcripts for programs with mid-December and early January deadlines. € Revise your resume or CV. € Write and revise a draft of your personal statement.
December	€ Finish revising your writing sample. € Finish revising your personal statement. Tailor it to specific schools as you see fit. € Send all your letter writers an email notifying them of all the deadlines, and emphasize those that are approaching. € Complete your applications to programs with mid-December and early January deadlines. € Request transcripts (after the fall semester grades have been posted) for the remaining programs.

January	€ Complete applications to the remainder of your programs.
	€ Follow up with the graduate secretaries at programs with earlier deadlines to verify all application materials have been received.
	€ Request additional transcripts, letters of recommendation, or GRE score reports if needed.
February	€ Follow up with the graduate secretaries at remaining programs to verify all application materials have been received.
	€ Request additional transcripts, letters of recommendation, or GRE score reports if needed.

Regardless of when your final deadlines are, strive to finish the process near the end of January. Afterward, you can double-check with the graduate secretaries of each program to make sure your materials were received if the online application system does not give you any confirmation of this. After that, focus on the spring semester and wait until faculty from the programs contact you with news regarding your application.

You may be tempted to consult the posts at places like The Grad Café to learn what experiences other applicants are having, but I advise that you avoid these sites. They can quickly become sources of stress and anxiety, and if you have genuine inquiries about what's going on with your application, you will get more accurate information from directly contacting someone in the department. (Usually, your best bets will be either the director of graduate studies or one of the department's administrative staff). If you are just worried about your chances of admission (and fear you have wasted a lot of time and money), you're better off relaxing and trying to feel good about what you have done. No one gets into graduate school without applying, and very few (if any) enjoy the process.

Further Reading

The advice in this appendix comes from many sources, but Eric Schwitzgebel's Applying to PhD Programs in Philosophy has had by far the biggest influence on its content. This guide played a crucial role in my own preparation for applying to graduate school, and I highly recommend you read it if you still have concerns about the application process. Here are some other resources worth consulting if you want additional guidance:

- Robert Schwartz's Applying to MA Programs in Philosophy
- Alex Guerrero's "Advice for Applying to PhD Programs in Philosophy"
- T. Allan Hillman's "Advice About Applying to PhD Programs in Philosophy"

The content in these guides overlaps heavily with what I have covered, and much of their advice is consistent with my own. Even so, you may benefit from these additional perspectives on the graduate school application process and learn more ways you can improve the quality of your application materials.

Appendix C: Active Learning Techniques

This list of active learning techniques is primarily derived from material presented at workshops hosted by the Academy of Teaching and Learning Excellence (now the [Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning](#)) at the University of South Florida during the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 academic years. Most of these techniques are designed to be implementable in both smaller and larger classes.

Techniques for Making Lectures More Interactive

1. **Picture Prompt** – Show students an image with no explanation, and ask them to identify/explain it, and justify their answers. Or ask students to write about it using terms from lecture, or to name the processes and concepts shown. Also works well as group activity. Do not give the "answer" until they have explored all options first.
2. **Think Break** – Ask a rhetorical question, and then allow 20 seconds for students to think about the problem before you go on to explain. This technique encourages students to take part in the problem-solving process even when discussion isn't feasible. Having students write something down (while you write an answer also) helps assure that they will in fact work on the problem.
3. **Choral Response** – Ask a one-word answer to the class at large; volume of answer will suggest degree of comprehension. Very useful to "drill" new vocabulary words into students.
4. **Instructor Storytelling** – Instructor illustrates a concept, idea, or principle with a real-life application, model, or case-study.
5. **Socratic Questioning** – The instructor replaces lecture by peppering students with questions, always asking the next question in a way that guides the conversation toward a learning outcome (or major Driving Question) that was desired from the beginning.
6. **Reverse Socratic Questioning** – The instructor requires students to ask him/her questions, and the instructor answers in such a way as to goad another question immediately but also drive the next student question in a certain direction.
7. **Pass the Pointer** – Place a complex, intricate, or detailed image on the screen and ask for volunteers to temporarily borrow the laser pointer to identify key features or ask questions about items they don't understand.
8. **Empty Outlines** – Distribute a partially completed outline of today's lecture and ask students to fill it in. Useful at start or at end of class.
9. **Classroom Opinion Polls** – Informal hand-raising suffices to test the waters before a controversial subject.
10. **Discussion Row** – Students take turns sitting in a front row that can earn extra credit as individuals when they volunteer to answer questions posed in class; this provides a group that will ALWAYS be prepared and interact with teacher questions.

11. **Total Physical Response** (TPR) – Students either stand or sit to indicate their binary answers, such as True/False, to the instructor's questions.

12. **Student Polling** – Select some students to travel the room, polling the others on a topic relevant to the course, then report back the results for everyone.

13. **Self-Assessment of Ways of Learning** – Prepare a questionnaire for students that probes what kind of learning style they use, so the course can match visual/aural/tactile learning styles.

14. **Quote Minus One** – Provide a quote relevant to your topic but leave out a crucial word and ask students to guess what it might be: "I cannot forecast to you the action of   ; it is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." This engages them quickly in a topic and makes them feel invested.

15. **Everyday Ethical Dilemmas** – Present an abbreviated case study with an ethical dilemma related to the discipline being studied.

16. **Polar Opposites** – Ask the class to examine two written-out versions of a theory (or corollary, law of nature, etc.), where one is incorrect, such as the opposite or a negation of the other. In deciding which is correct, students will have to examine the problem from all angles.

17. **Pop Culture** – Infuse your lectures, case studies, sample word problems for use during class with current events from the pop culture world. Rather than citing statistics for housing construction, for instance, illustrate the same statistical concept you are teaching by inventing statistics about something students gossip about, like how often a certain pop star appears in public without make-up.

18. **Make Them Guess** – Introduce a new subject by asking an intriguing question, something that few will know the answer to (but should interest all of them). Accept blind guessing for a while before giving the answer to build curiosity.

19. **Make It Personal** – Design class activities (or even essays) to address the real lives of the individual students. Instead of asking for reflections on Down's Syndrome, ask for personal stories of neurological problems by a family member or anyone they have ever met.

20. **Read Aloud** – Choose a small text (500 words or less) to read aloud, and ask students to pay particular attention during this phase of lecture. A small text read orally in a larger lecture can focus attention.

21. **Punctuated Lectures** – Ask student to perform five steps: listen, stop, reflect, write, give feedback. Students become self-monitoring listeners.

22. **Word of the Day** – Select an important term and highlight it throughout the class session, working it into as many concepts as possible. Challenge students to do the same in their interactive activities.

23. **Recall, Summarize, Question, Connect, and Comment** – This method of starting each session (or each week) has five steps to reinforce the previous session's material: recall it, summarize it, phrase a remaining question, connect it to the class as a whole, and comment on that class session.

24. **Focused Listing** – List several ideas related to the main focus point. Helpful for starting new topics.
25. **Background Knowledge Probe** – Use questionnaire (multi-choice or short answer) when introducing a new topic.
26. **Goal Ranking and Matching** – Students rank their goals for the class, then instructor combines those with her own list.
27. **Interest/Knowledge/Skills Checklist** – Assesses interest and preparation for the course, and can help adjust teaching agenda.
28. **Documented Problem Solutions** – Keep track of the steps needed to solve specific types of problems. Model a list for students first and then ask them to perform similar steps.
29. **Provocative Picture** – Begin the lecture with a picture meant to provoke discussion or emotion (another option: a cartoon).
30. **Pass the Chalk** – Provide chalk or a soft toy; whoever has it must answer your next question, and they pass it on to the student of their choice.
31. **Pass the Dart** – Like Pass the Chalk, use a real dartboard to decide which student must answer the next question (student names are arranged on the dartboard already).
32. **Beach Ball Bingo** – Write questions or prompts onto all surfaces of a beach ball (or tape them on). When the next student catches the ball, he/she answers one of the questions where fingers are touching the ball.
33. **Quaker Meeting** – Students highlight key passages of the reading, and there is silence (like a Quaker meeting) until someone wants to read his/her out, and others follow. End with brief writing about what they learned from the sentences.
34. **Town Hall Meeting** – Abdicate the front of the room for a student willing to speak out on a controversial subject, and when she is done with her comment, she selects the next speaker from the hands raised.
35. **The Half Class Lecture** – Divide the class in half and provide reading material to one half. Lecture on that same material to the other half of the class. Then, switch the groups and repeat, ending with a recap by pairing up members of opposite groups.
36. **Tournament** – Divide the class into at least two groups and announce a competition for most points on a practice test. Let them study a topic together and then give that quiz, tallying points. After each round, let them study the next topic before quizzing again. The points should be carried over from round to round. The student impulse for competition will focus their engagement onto the material itself.
37. **Three Part Interview** – Pose the following question to the entire class: "What do you think are the three biggest issues related to…?" Choose the student with the birthday closest to today's date and have them stand and share their 3 responses to the question for one minute. Move clockwise around the room until all have shared.

Individual Student Work

38. **One-Minute Papers** – Students write for one minute on a specific question (which might be generalized to "what was the most important thing you learned today"). Best used at the end of the class session.
39. **Muddiest Point** – Like the Minute Paper, but asks for the "most confusing" point instead. Best used at the end of the class session.
40. **Misconception Check** – Discover class's preconceptions. Useful for starting new chapters.
41. **Drawing for Understanding** – Students illustrate an abstract concept or idea. Comparing drawings around the room can clear up misconceptions.
42. **Turn Taking Reading** – Instead of the instructor reading a paragraph on screen (or leaving silence for students to do it), instruct them we will sit in silence until someone is moved to read ONE sentence, then someone else – anyone – will start the next sentence. Adds "good" tension and raises energy.
43. **Haiku** – Students write a haiku (a three-line poem: 5-syllables, then 7, then 5) on a given topic or concept, and then share it with others.
44. **Board of Artwork** – Post publicly the collected drawings / abstract concepts that students turned in for a previous activity and create an opportunity for discussion and debrief.
45. **Voting Dots** – Provide colored dot stickers to students and ask them to "vote" on statements they agree with the most, by using up their limited dot supply on the pre-written topics displayed around the room on poster boards.
46. **Circle the Questions** – Pre-make a handout that has a few dozen likely student questions (make them specific) on your topic for that day and ask students to circle the ones they don't know the answers to, then turn in the paper.
47. **Ask the Winner** – Ask students to silently solve a problem on the board. After revealing the answer, instruct those who got it right to raise their hands (and keep them raised); then, all other students are to talk to someone with a raised hand to better understand the question and how to solve it next time.
48. **What's the Principle** – After recognizing the problem, students assess what principle to apply in order to solve it. Helps focus on problem TYPES rather than individual specific problems. Principle(s) should be listed out.
49. **Infographic** – Students use online services (visual.ly, infogr.am) to create an infographic that combines flowchart logic and visual presentation
50. **Bookmark Notes** - Distribute full-length paper to be used as a bookmark for the current chapter. On it, record prompts and other "reading questions," and require students to record their notes, observations, and objections while reading onto these bookmarks for collection and discussion in class.
51. **True or False?** – Distribute index cards (one to each student) on which is written a statement. Half of the cards will contain statements that are true, half false. Students decide if theirs is one of the true statements or not, using whatever means they desire. Variation:

designate half the room a space for those who think their statements are true, and the other half for false.

52. **"Real-World"** – Have students discuss in class how a topic or concept relates to a real-world application or product. Then have students write about this topic for homework. Variation: ask them to record their answer on index cards.

53. **Concept Mapping** – Students write keywords onto sticky notes and then organize them into a flowchart. Could be less structured: students simply draw the connections they make between concepts.

54. **Advice Letter** – Students write a letter of advice to future students on how to be successful students in that course.

55. **Tabloid Titles** – Ask students to write a tabloid-style headline that would illustrate the concept currently being discussed. Share and choose the best.

56. **Bumper Stickers** – Ask students to write a slogan-like bumper sticker to illustrate a particular concept from lecture. Variation: can be used to ask them to sum up the entire course in one sentence.

57. **One-Sentence Summary** – Summarize the topic into one sentence that incorporates all of who/what/when/where/why/how creatively.

58. **Directed Paraphrasing** – Students asked to paraphrase part of a lesson for a specific audience (and a specific purpose).

59. **Word Journal** – First, summarize the entire topic on paper with a single word. Then use a paragraph to explain your word choice.

60. **Truth Statements** – Either to introduce a topic or check comprehension, ask individuals to list out "It is true that..." statements on the topic being discussed. The ensuing discussion might illustrate how ambiguous knowledge is sometimes.

61. **Objective Check** – Students write a brief essay in which they evaluate to what extent their work fulfills an assignment's objectives.

62. **Opposites** – Instructor lists out one or more concepts, for which students must come up with an antonym, and then defend their choice.

63. **Student Storytelling** – Students are given assignments that make use of a given concept in relation to something that seems personally relevant (such as requiring the topic to be someone in their family).

64. **Application to Major** – During last 15 minutes of class, ask students to write a short article about how the point applies to their major.

65. **Pro and Con Grid** – Students list out the pros and cons for a given subject.

66. **Harvesting** – After an experience/activity in class, ask students to reflect on "what" they learned, "so what" (why is it important and what are the implications), and "now what" (how to apply it or do things differently).

67. **Chain Notes** – Instructor pre-distributes index cards and passes around an envelope, on which is written a question relating to the learning environment (i.e., are the group

discussions useful?) Students write a very brief answer, drop in their own card, and pass the envelope to the next student.

68. **Focused Autobiographical Sketches** – Focuses on a single successful learning experience, one relevant to the current course.
69. **Course-Related Self-Confidence Surveys** – Simple questions that measure how self-confident students are when it comes to a specific skill. Once they become aware they can do it, they focus on it more.
70. **Profiles of Admirable Individuals** – Students write a brief profile of an individual in a field related to the course. Students assess their own values and learn best practices for this field.
71. **Memory Matrix** – Identify a key taxonomy and then design a grid that represents those interrelationships. Keep it simple at first. Avoid trivial or ambiguous relationships, which tend to backfire by focusing students on superficial kinds of learning. Although probably most useful in introductory courses, this technique can also be used to help develop basic study skills for students who plan to continue in the field.
72. **Categorizing Grid** – Hand out rectangles divided into cells and a jumbled listing of terms that need to be categorized by row and column.
73. **Defining Features Matrix** – Hand out a simple table where students decide if a defining feature is PRESENT or ABSENT. For instance, they might have to read through several descriptions of theories and decide if each refers to behaviorist or constructivist models of learning.
74. **What/How/Why Outlines** – Write brief notes answering the what / how / why questions when analyzing a message or text.
75. **Approximate Analogies** – Students provide the second half of an analogy (A is to B as X is to Y).
76. **Problem Recognition Tasks** – Offer case studies with different types of problems and ask students to identify the TYPE of problem (which is different from solving it)
77. **Switch it up**! – Ask students to work on one problem for a few minutes and intentionally move to a second problem without debriefing the first one, then solve the second one and only then return to the first one for more work. A carefully chosen second problem can shed light on the first problem, but this also works well if the problems are not directly related to each other.
78. **Reading Rating Sheets** – Students fill out a ratings sheet on the course readings, on how clear, useful, and interesting it was.
79. **Assignment Assessments** – Students give feedback on their homework assignments, and evaluate them as learning tools.
80. **Exam Evaluations** – Students explain what they are learning from exams, and evaluate the fairness, usefulness, and quality of tests.
81. **Group-Work Evaluations** – Questionnaires asking how effective groupwork has been in the class.

82. **Teacher-Designed Feedback Forms** – Rather than use standardized evaluation forms, teachers create ones tailored for their needs and their classes. Especially useful midway through the term.
83. **Writing Fables** – Students write an animal fable (or at least sketch its outline) that will lead to a one-sentence moral matching the current concept discussed in class. May be done verbally instead.

Students Working in Pairs

84. **Think-Pair-Share** – Students share and compare possible answers to a question with a partner before addressing the larger class.
85. **Pair-Share-Repeat** – After a pair-share experience, ask students to find a new partner and debrief the wisdom of the *old* partnership to this *new* partner.
86. **Wisdom of Another** – After any individual brainstorm or creative activity, partner students up to share their results. Then, call for volunteers of students who found their partner's work to be interesting or exemplary. Students are sometimes more willing to share in plenary the work of fellow students than their own work.
87. **Forced Debate** – Students debate in pairs, but must defend the opposite side of their personal opinion. Variation: half the class take one position, half the other. They line up and face each other. Each student may only speak once, so that all students on both sides can engage the issue.
88. **Optimist/Pessimist** – In pairs, students take opposite emotional sides of a conversation. This technique can be applied to case studies and problem solving as well.
89. **Teacher and Student** - Individually brainstorm the main points of the last homework, then assign roles of teacher and student to pairs. The teacher's job is to sketch the main points, while the student's job is to cross off points on his list as they are mentioned, but come up with 2 or 3 that the instructor missed.
90. **Peer Review Writing Task** – To assist students with a writing assignments, encourage them to exchange drafts with a partner. The partner reads the essay and writes a three-paragraph response: the first paragraph outlines the strengths of the essay, the second paragraph discusses the essay's problems, and the third paragraph is a description of what the partner would focus on in revision, if it were her essay.
91. **Invented Dialogues** – Students weave together real quotes from primary sources, or invent ones to fit the speaker and context.
92. **My Christmas Gift** – Students mentally select one of their recent gifts as related to or emblematic of a concept given in class, and must tell their partners how this gift relates to the concept. The one with a closer connection wins.
93. **Psychoanalysis** – Students get into pairs and interview one another about a recent learning unit. The focus, however, is upon analysis of the material rather than rote memorization. Sample Interview Questions: Can you describe to me the topic that you would like to

analyze today? What were your attitudes/beliefs before this topic? How did your attitudes/beliefs change after learning about this topic? How will/have your actions/decisions altered based on your learning of this topic? How have your perceptions of others/events changed?

94. **Get One, Give One** – Students fold a piece of paper in half and write "Give One" on one side and "Get One" on the other side. On the "Give One" side, as them to write four insights from today's material. Have them stand up and find a partner. Each student shares one idea from their "Give One" side of the paper and writes down one idea on the "Get One" side of the paper. Find a new partner until your "Get One" side of paper is full of new ideas!

95. **Comparing Notes** – At regular intervals in the lecture, allow students to share and compare notes to review and reinforce understanding.

Small Group Work

96. **Board Rotation** – Assign groups of students to each of the boards you have set up in the room (four or more works best), and assign one topic/question per board. After each group writes an answer, they rotate to the next board and write their answer below the first, and so on around the room. Variation: pass around flipchart paper with the same task.

97. **Pass the Problem** – Divide students into groups. Give the first group a case or a problem and ask them to identify (and write down) the first step in solving the problem or analyzing the case (3 minutes). Pass the problem on to the next group and have them identify the next step. Continue until all groups have contributed.

98. **Pick the Winner** – Divide the class into groups and have all groups work on the same problem and record an answer/strategy on paper. Then, ask groups to switch with a nearby group, and evaluate *their* answer. After a few minutes, allow each set of groups to merge and ask them to select the better answer from the two choices, which will be presented to the class as a whole.

99. **Layered Cake Discussion** - Every group works on the same task for a few minutes, then there's a plenary debrief for the whole class, and finally repeat with a new topic to be discussed in the groups.

100. **Student Learning Communities** – Like faculty learning communities, these communities of practice are meant to invest the participants with ownership and a focus on sharing and joint discovery. Can be structured or unstructured.

101. **Lecture Reaction** – Divide the class into four groups after a lecture: questioners (must ask two questions related to the material), example givers (provide applications), divergent thinkers (must disagree with some points of the lecture), and agreers (explain which points they agreed with or found helpful). After discussion, brief the whole class.

102. **Movie Application** – In groups, students discuss examples of movies that made use of a concept or event discussed in class, trying to identify at least one way the movie-makers got it right, and one way they got it wrong.
103. **Student Pictures** – Ask students to bring their own pictures from home to illustrate a specific concept to their working groups.
104. **Definitions and Applications** – In groups, students provide definitions, associations, and applications of concepts discussed in lecture.
105. **TV Commercial** – In groups, students create a 30-second TV commercial for the subject currently being discussed in class. Variation: ask them to act out their commercials.
106. **Blender** – Students silently write a definition or brainstorm an idea for several minutes on paper. Then they form into groups, and two of them read their ideas and integrate elements from each. A third student reads his, and again integration occurs with the previous two, until finally everyone in the group has been integrated (or has attempted integration).
107. **Human Tableau or Class Modeling** – Groups create living scenes (also of inanimate objects) which relate to the classroom concepts or discussions.
108. **Build From Restricted Components** – Provide limited resources (or a discrete list of ideas that must be used) and either literally or figuratively dump them on the table, asking students in groups to construct a solution using only these things (note: may be familiar from the *Apollo 13* movie). If possible, provide red herrings, and ask students to construct a solution using the minimum number of items possible.
109. **Ranking Alternatives** – Instructor presents a situation, everyone thinks up as many alternative courses of action (or explanations of the situation) as possible. Compile list. In groups, now rank them by preference.
110. **Simulation** – Place the class into a long-term simulation (like as a business) to enable Problem- Based Learning (PBL).
111. **Imaginary Show and Tell** – Students pretend they have brought an object relevant to current discussion, and "display" it to the class while talking about its properties.
112. **Six Degrees of "RNA Transcription Errors"** – Like the parlor game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" (in which actors are linked by joint projects), you provide groups with a conceptual start point and challenge them to leap to a given concept in six moves or fewer. One student judge in each group determines if each leap is fair and records the nature of the leaps for reporting back to the class.
113. **Sticky Note Discussions** – Divide students into cooperative groups and have them read individually. Ask them to use sticky notes to mark places that they want to talk about in the text. Then direct them to reread as a group and discuss the parts they have marked.

Games

114. **Crossword Puzzle** – Create a crossword puzzle as a handout for students to review terms, definitions, or concepts before a test. Some online websites will automate the puzzle creation.

115. **Jeopardy** – Play jeopardy like the TV show with your students. Requires a fair amount of preparation. Can be used also for icebreakers (such as finding out what participants already know about your subject, your university, etc.).
116. **Pictionary** – For important concepts and especially terms, have students play pictionary: one draws images only, the rest must guess the term.
117. **Super-Password** – Also for concepts and terms; one student tries to get his partner to say the key term by circumlocution, and cannot say any of the "forbidden words" on a card prepared ahead of time.
118. **Guess the Password** – The instructor reveals a list of words (esp. nouns) one at a time and at each point, ask students to guess what key term they are related to. The hints become increasingly specific to make the answer clearer.
119. **Twenty Questions** – Assign a person, theory, concept, event, etc., to individual students and have the partner ask yes/no questions to guess what the concept is. Also works on a plenary level, with one student fielding the questions from the whole class.
120. **Hollywood Squares** – Choose students to sit as "celebrities" at the front of the class. Variation: allow the celebrities to use books and notes in deciding how to help the contestants.
121. **Scrabble** – Use the chapter (or course) title as the pool of letters from which to make words and allow teams to brainstorm as many words as possible from that list, but all words must be relevant to this test. Variation: actually play scrabble on boards afterward.
122. **Who am I**? - Tape a term or name on the back of each student, out of view. Each student then wanders about the room, posing yes/no questions to the other students in an effort to guess the term on his own back.
123. **Ticket out the Door** – At the end of class, ask students to summarize the lecture today, or provide one new personal significant learning outcome (in a few sentences), and give their response to the professor for their ticket out of the door.

Student Questions

124. **Student Questions (Index Cards)** – At the start of the semester, pass out index cards and ask each student to write a question about the class and your expectations. The cards rotate through the room, with each student adding a check-mark if they agree this question is important for them. The teacher learns what the class is most anxious about.
125. **Questions as Homework** – Students write questions before class on 3x5 cards: "What I really wanted to know about mitochondrial DNA but was afraid to ask..."
126. **Student-Generated Test Questions** – Students create likely exam questions and model the answers. Variation: same activity, but with students in teams, taking each others' quizzes.
127. **Minute Paper Shuffle** – Ask students to write a relevant question about the material, using no more than a minute, and collect them all. Shuffle and re-distribute, asking each student to answer his new question. Can be continued a second or third round with the same

questions.

Role-Playing

128. **Role-Playing** – Assign roles for a concept, students research their parts at home, and they act it out in class. Observers critique and ask questions.
129. **Role Reversal** – Teacher role-plays as the student, asking questions about the content. The students are collectively the teacher, and must answer the questions. Works well as test review/prep.
130. **Jury Trial**. Divide the class into various roles (including witnesses, jury, judge, lawyers, defendant, prosecution, audience) to deliberate on a controversial subject.
131. **Press Conference** – Ask students to role-play as investigative reporters asking questions of you, the expert on the topic. They should seek a point of contradiction or inadequate evidence, hounding you in the process with follow-up questions to all your replies.
132. **Press Conference (Guest Speaker)** – Invite a guest speaker and run the class like a press conference, with a few prepared remarks and then fielding questions from the audience.
133. **Analytic Memo** – Write a one-page analysis of an issue, roleplaying as an employer or client.

Student Presentations

134. **Fishbowl** – A student unpacks her ideas and thoughts on a topic in front of others, who take notes and then write a response. Avoid asking questions.
135. **Impromptu Speeches** – Students generate keywords, drop them into a hat, and self-choose presenters to speak for 30 seconds on each topic.
136. **Anonymous Peer Feedback** – For student presentations or group projects, encourage frank feedback from the observing students by asking them to rip up a page into quarters and dedicating comments to each presenter. Multiple variations are possible in "forcing" particular types of comments (i.e., require two compliments and two instances of constructive feedback). Then, ask students to create a pile of comments for Student X, another pile for Student Y, and so on.

Brainstorming

137. **Round Robin** – Have groups silently list top 3 answers to a problem/question. Allow all groups to present one idea in a round robin format until all groups have exhausted their lists. Scribe all answers and then discuss how to reduce/re-categorize answers. Have groups vote on top three, provide results, discuss, and vote again.
138. **Brainstorming on the Board** – Students call out concepts and terms related to a topic about to be introduced; the instructor writes them on the board. If possible, group them into

categories as you record the responses. Works to gauge pre-existing knowledge and focus attention on the subject.

139. **Brainstorming Tree** – While brainstorming on the board, circle the major concepts and perform sub-brainstorms on those specific words; the result will look like a tree blooming outward.

140. **Brainstorming in a Circle** – Group students to discuss an issue together, and then spend a few minutes jotting down individual notes. One person starts a brainstorming list and passes it to the student to the right, who then adds to the list and passes it along again.

141. **Chalk Talk** – Ask students to go to multiple boards around the room to brainstorm answers to a prompt/assignment, but disallow all talking. Can also be done in groups.

Appendix D: The Shadow Self[195]

In 2018, Alia Wong published an article in *The Atlantic* that detailed the various ways that PhD students often suffer from mental illness. The factors that put a strain on these students' mental health are familiar: long-term employment prospects are poor, some students accumulate massive debt, and getting the PhD is an intellectually taxing enterprise. Mix that together, and you get a recipe for stress and unhappiness.

The article focuses on a study of economics PhDs, and according to the survey mentioned, they are three times more likely to experience depression than the general population. (About 6% of the general population experiences depression; roughly 18% of those surveyed did.) But economics is far from the only field where concerns about mental health loom large. A 2014 study at UC Berkley found that a much higher proportion of their student population suffered from apparent depression, including an astonishing 64% of surveyed students in the arts and humanities. Broadening to the full spectrum of mental health issues, a 2017 study found that 50% of academic scholars have experienced mental health issues due to their academic work, which is roughly double the rate at which the general population experiences mental health issues. In 2018, Teresa Evans and her colleagues argued that there was sufficient evidence of a mental health crisis in graduate education. A 2023 meta-analysis of the literature on anxiety in graduate students corroborates this sentiment, suggesting that about 35% of graduate students suffer from anxiety.

I could list other findings, but you get the point: a lot of graduate students struggle with their mental health. Philosophy graduate students are no exception, and even after graduate school, most early career scholars who find employment spend time in temporary appointments where they are forced to go back in the job market within a year or two. Facing the need to continue publishing and teaching well so that they can brave the job market gauntlet again, these positions are often just as stressful as the tail end of graduate school. And even when stable employment is secured, many departments are just one change to the general education program away from their existence being in jeopardy. A tenure-track position is often not a panacea for the challenges of academic life.

When we consider all this, it should not be surprising that many of our colleagues are struggling with depression, anxiety, and their ilk. The victims of these conditions are all around us, and yet we so rarely acknowledge this fact. Consider these remarks from Peter Railton's 2015 Dewey Lecture:

> And what of depression? Perhaps we all know the mask of depression, that frozen, affectless face we catch glimpses of on our students, colleagues, and friends. I can't do anything about that. But perhaps I can do something about the face of depression—its visible image in the minds of our children and parents, teachers and students. Because in

---

[195] The material in this appendix originally appeared in the Philosophers' Cocoon post "The Shadow Self."

truth, we are still to a considerable degree still in a world of "Don't ask, don't tell" with regard to depression and associated mental disorders, such as anxiety, even though these will severely affect one in ten of us over the course of a lifetime, and often at more than one point in a lifetime.

Dr. Railton then goes onto describe his own experiences with depression and his reasons for disclosure. Despite his accomplishments and established position in the profession, he still fears that his admission will in some ways cause him to be reduced in the eyes of his colleagues – seen as flawed or inferior because of his history. Such concerns are, as he acknowledges, likely to be even stronger among those who are still at the early stages of their careers. But it is also crucial, in his view, to create an environment where people in professional philosophy can feel comfortable disclosing their mental illness and seeking treatment. The sad truth is that many remain reluctant to disclose these difficulties to others, and most who are actively struggling with their mental health do not seek any treatment. The result is that many innocent people are suffering, and some are even taking their own lives. Thus, the hope Dr. Railton expressed in his address was that he could help make a positive change in the academic environment we inhabit by making it more acceptable for people to be open about depression and similar ailments and feel more comfortable seeking treatment.

The studies I mentioned earlier show how bleak the picture is, though, and Peter Railton is only one person – only one representation of "the face of depression" (to borrow a phrase from his lecture). Perhaps then it is time to present another illustration of what this ailment can look like.

I had seen depression before. A severe depressive episode, coupled with an eating disorder, robbed one of my best friends of six months of his life, and while he eventually recovered, there was a long stretch where I feared his depression would get the better of him. Over the phone, it [sounded as if all life had been drained from him](#) – like I was only talking with a shell of the person who used to inhabit his body. I am still surprised – and grateful – that he survived that episode.

As an instructor, I once had a student who disclosed symptoms of depression to me in his responses to short answer questions on an exam. When I noticed, I reported the matter to the counseling center at the University of Tennessee. When this student returned to class, he shared with me that he had been spending his days almost entirely confined to bed and had been severely depressed for more than a month. While those who report students to the counseling center are not identified to the student, he noticed the timing between taking the exam and getting the phone call from the counseling center and deduced that I must have been the one who notified them. I wondered whether the student would be ambivalent about what I had done, but he only expressed gratitude at my helping him get free from that state of mind.

These experiences and a few others had given me a peek behind the veil, so the impact of Dr. Railton's lecture was not lost on me when I read the manuscript for the first time. Based on [others' reactions](#), it clearly resonated with a lot of the philosophers who attended the lecture. But time quickly relegated it to memory, and despite some challenges with the dissertation, I never

had any struggles with mental illness in graduate school. After escaping with the PhD unscathed, I believed that my mental health could only get better since the stress of dissertation work had passed.

Just before the fall semester started in 2018, I spent a week in Colorado at the Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress. I gave a pair of commentaries – one at the pre-conference animal ethics workshop and one at the main event itself. I spent a lot of time outside the main conference events going out for dinner and drinks with friends and even squeezing in a group venture to The Wild Animal Sanctuary. But there was a cost: for one week straight, I got to sleep between 1 and 3 am Mountain Time. When I went back to the east coast (a 2-hour time change), I struggled to get to sleep any earlier than 4:00 am. This did not translate well to teaching an early morning class on Mondays and Wednesdays and gradually evolved into a pattern of early-waking insomnia and deeply irregular sleep patterns.

Even so, through September, it didn't matter a whole lot. I managed to stay productive and keep up with my work through the first six weeks of the term, and I was slowly adjusting my sleep schedule back toward something that could be considered normal. But things started to get out of hand when I went back on the job market. October was packed with deadlines for tenure-track jobs, so that meant there were cover letters to tailor, HR systems to navigate, online profiles to update, and a myriad of old statements to revise.

As anyone who has been on the market knows, it is not a pleasant experience and sucks up an outrageous amount of your time (assuming you send out a sizeable number of applications). So I expected that my quality of life would dip for a little while just like it did in 2016. There would be a few weeks with an increased workload and some late nights, but it would pass.

Except this time, it didn't pass. It only got worse. Night after night in late October, I was seated in the dim glow of my computer monitor editing cover letters and attaching PDFs until 3:00 am. When I tried to squeeze in a few hours of sleep before waking up at 7:00 to prep my morning class, the passage to unconsciousness often eluded me. My alarm would sound hours later when I was still awake, and I'd feel like lying down had just been a waste of time. Other nights, when I'd be so exhausted that I would fall asleep early, my reverie would be short-lived, and I'd wake up at 3:00 or 4:00 am having only slept a few hours.

Progressing on my research during this stretch was a lost cause. I didn't have the energy. It was all I could do to keep meeting job application deadlines and teaching competently. Worse yet, I was starting to absolutely hate my weekly routine. There seemed to be nothing in my professional life that brought me any sense of enjoyment or satisfaction. It all felt shallow and meaningless. There was a voice in my head reminding me that in 2016 only 1 of my 90 job applications had ultimately been successful. "That means that almost all this time you're spending is wasted," it would say. "This suffering is mostly pointless. Why are you doing this? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Driving around Tampa became distressing. I know all too well what sleep deprivation does to a person's reaction time and how it impairs one's driving abilities, and in my experience, Florida drivers are not too patient or observant. Worse than that, the voice would occasionally chime in with unsettling observations. "You know," it would nag, "the speed limit is 45, but everyone's going at least 50 – including you. If you just edged across the median, there'd probably be no survivors."

When we think about cases of suicide, we might conjure up images of an angsty teen who has an elaborate plan about how he'll commit suicide at some particular date and time to teach all those who have spited him a lesson. There are cases like that, of course, but suicidal ideation can be much more insidious and involuntary. With respect to my own life, I do not consider suicide an acceptable option. To echo Principle Gardner from one of the more memorable scenes from Charlie Bartlett, "I can't kill myself. I got too many responsibilities." And beyond that, good parents deserve to be spared the tragedy of outliving their children. My parents are good parents, and so I believe I am obligated to outlive them if I can.

At one point, Peter Railton characterizes depression as a conflict between the mind and the body, but in my case, the relevant conflict was between two different parts of the mind – the rational, principled self that encapsulates my core values and a doppelganger that had spawned seemingly with the sole purpose of sabotaging my life. A conflict between my true self and a shadow self trying to uproot him.

So sure, I had principled reasons for not thinking about suicide, but the shadow self does not care about your principles or the reasons that underlie them. The shadow self will sometimes use logic in an effort to unravel you. If referencing facts and making arguments is the best means of making you hate yourself and your life, then that's what it will do. But the shadow self does not *need* logic. If that strategy fails, the shadow self is perfectly satisfied to use other tactics – to conjure unpleasant memories, to cultivate irrational doubts, to play on your fears – anything that will make your life worse. Because of this, the shadow self cannot be vanquished by rational deliberation alone.

Throughout the entire experience, I was reminding myself that things were not that bad on the whole. Objectively, that was true. I know, for example, based on a peer observation and my student evaluations from that semester that my teaching went very well. The students did not look upon me as an incompetent instructor who ambled into class tired and frustrated every single day even though that is precisely how it felt. As someone who had suffered from depressive episodes for 30 years told me, "The disconnect between how you feel you're doing and how the rest of the world perceives you is one of the enduring mysteries of the experience."

My coping strategies were not the best. In part, this was because I did not accurately assess my circumstances. As I mentioned earlier, I expected to feel stressed and overworked in October. It wasn't until the end of November that I started to realize how bad things had gotten. If I had been more familiar with the characteristics of a major depressive episode, I might have understood what was going on earlier. There are nine symptoms of a major depressive episode:

216

1. **Depressed mood**
2. **Loss of interest or pleasure**
3. Change in appetite
4. Change in sleep
5. Change in body activity (psychomotor changes)
6. Loss of energy
7. Feelings of worthlessness and excessive or inappropriate guilt
8. Indecisiveness or a decrease in concentration
9. Suicidal ideation

To be diagnosed as experiencing one of these episodes, you must exhibit one of the top two symptoms (in bold) and at least four other symptoms for a period of at least two weeks. Once the thought had occurred to me and I looked up this list, it was obvious what was going on. Aside from maintaining my normal eating habits and not having any detectable psychomotor changes, every other symptom was present.

Before I came to understand my situation, I mainly fought against the depression by trying to keep my brain occupied with other activities. Specifically, I found that it was easy to silence the shadow self when I was either immersed in a good video game or playing tennis. So I decided October was a good time to start new playthroughs of [Persona 5](#) and [Fallout 4](#), which are both ludicrously long games. Caught up in those alternate universes, it was easy to forget just how bad life felt in the real world.

Playing tennis was effective for a very different reason. I played competitively in the juniors and in college, and so I have spent many thousands of hours on a tennis court during my lifetime. At this point, much of it is muscle memory and pattern recognition. On court, it was easy to tune out the shadow self and just focus on the next shot or the next point. Given my sleep problems, prioritizing tennis had the odd result that I would sometimes spend more hours on the tennis court than I had slept the night before – a behavior that I would normally describe as unhealthy and stupid. But these were hardly normal circumstances, and two hours of freedom from the shadow self was often too valuable to pass up. Some nights after those sessions, my body was so fatigued that sleep – real sleep – did not elude me.

These activities, however, were not a substitute for real therapy. Eventually, I contacted an old friend who happens to be a licensed clinical psychologist and discussed what was going on. That initial conversation left me so emotionally exhausted that I could barely utter a word by the end of the phone call. After I hung up, I crawled into bed and stared up at the ceiling in my darkened bedroom. It was a little after 9:00, and I worried that if I fell asleep now, I would wake up at 2:00 and be unable to get back to sleep. While pondering that matter, a slow but steady stream of tears started to trail down my cheeks. *So much sadness*, I thought. *How can there be so much sadness within me. Why is this happening?*

It is easy for me to understand why so few people disclose their mental struggles and why so few of those in pain seek treatment. Disclosure requires making oneself vulnerable in a very raw and

personal way, and seeking treatment carries with it a tacit acknowledgement that you cannot handle things on your own. Given the social norms that pressure men to exude toughness and self-sufficiency – to never show weakness or rely on others – they are particularly prone to keep their struggles to themselves. Disclosure also comes with the risk of being judged by others. There is still a heavy stigma attached to mental illness. People often assume such individuals are irrational, socially incompetent, weak-willed, emotionally unstable, or some combination of these things. These traits are then used as justification for ridicule, condemnation, or disassociation. (If you want examples, consider some of the remarks made on the reddit post devoted to discussing Railton's Dewey Lecture.)

Academia is littered with accomplished people who also have a history of mental illness, but these negative attitudes are so entrenched that occasional counterexamples are not enough to upend them. The result is that many people stay silent about their suffering. Tragically, in doing so, they eliminate the one significant advantage they have over the shadow self.

The shadow self shares your memories, knows your fears, and is not restricted by the limits of rationality in its efforts to destroy you. In a straightforward confrontation, it's a tough foe to defeat, and fighting it one-on-one plays right into its hands. The good news is that you don't have to fight it alone.

Around the time that I was getting ready for another job market push, I disconnected from a few of my social groups. I was active on a couple Discord servers and muted those apps. (Discord is a social media app geared toward gamers but hosts a lot of groups that span a wide range of interests.) I cut down on attending department events, and I generally stayed away from Facebook. I wanted to keep distractions to a minimum while I focused on churning out job applications. That was a reasonable thought, but looking back, this was a terrible mistake. It created and reinforced a pernicious isolation. I should have been making time to keep in touch with the people in my online circles and tried to be a little more socially active in the local community, and I did precisely the opposite.

By the end of November – when I had finally come to recognize the gravity of the situation – I took solace in the fact that I only had about two weeks to endure before I could take some time off for the holidays. But my friend – who was functioning as my makeshift therapist – made a pretty firm request: if things don't improve significantly by the start of the semester in January, I had to get some more substantial therapy – in person from someone in Tampa. I agreed to that condition and grinded through the remainder of the term.

Fortunately, there was only one job application with a deadline that fell during winter break, and I avoided doing any other work over that stretch. The time back at home was awkward: I had straightforwardly told my parents what I had been going through and tried to contextualize it so that they wouldn't panic, but they could tell that something was still wrong. My eyes were too deadened, my energy levels too low, my voice too labored.

Within a few days, my sleep cycle again resembled something normal, and after a week of sleeping through the night, I felt somewhat human again. Things still weren't right, but it was a start. Some time with family and friends helped to abate the emptiness within. Yet I was still afraid. I'd been falling down a chasm and just managed to grab onto a ledge to halt my fall. Now I had to climb back up to the surface, well aware that a misstep could send me falling back down again.

When I was back in Florida, I made a few changes to my routine. First, I limited myself to two job applications per day. No exceptions. Second, I truncated my teaching preparation. I was teaching philosophy of religion that semester – a subject I knew well but had never taught before. Normally, I would have spent a lot of time developing PowerPoint slides and thinking about how I wanted to structure discussions and in-class exercises. This semester, I mainly stuck to using the dry-erase board to save myself prep time and let discussion be a little more free-flowing than usual. I also reoriented many of my assessments to be online so that I could take advantage of the auto-grading features and avoid having to decipher had student handwriting on essay questions. Third, I scheduled a 10-day vacation in May so that I would have something to look forward to during the semester.

I managed to turn a revise-and-resubmit into a publication in January, but beyond that, I did not do much research in the spring. Even with the changes I had made to my routine and with additional efforts made to protect my sleep and get outside a few times a week to play tennis, it took about 3 months to climb out of the chasm I had fallen into. When I emerged, I was able to recognize that my life still mostly sucked – I was still living somewhere I didn't care for, still losing a dozen hours a week to job applications and interviews (with no positive results), and still frustrated and unhappy with how the year was going – but at least I felt like myself again. A massive improvement!

Unfortunately, recovery from one major depressive episode may not be the end of the story. [About 50% of those who have one will have another one later in life](). Once the shadow self manifests, it can be suppressed but not always purged. Does this mean that we'll meet again at some point? Who knows? At least if there's a next time, I will be better equipped to handle him.

A few people who endured similar circumstances in the last year have asked me in private how I managed to escape that depressed mental state. I've tried to explain the process in my prior remarks, but I think I can also narrow it down to a few concrete suggestions:

1. **Investigate if you think something is wrong**. I think a known enemy is much easier to fight than an unknown enemy. Once I understood that I was experiencing a depressive episode, it was easier to identify some steps I could take to try and make things better.
2. **Stay connected to your peers, even if that mostly consists of long-distance relationships**. Don't allow yourself to become isolated when things are not going well: this will only make things worse.
3. **Be willing to satisfice with your work**. There are a lot of pressures that push academics toward perfectionism, especially those in early career positions who have to produce at

the level and quantity of already tenured faculty just to be semi-competitive for permanent positions. Yet the tendency toward perfectionism has to be resisted or else you may well work yourself into oblivion.

4. **Protect your hobbies**. I've written about this before, but it's perhaps even more important in the context of fending off the shadow self. You have to maintain a few things in your life that you enjoy – no matter what.

5. **Protect your sleep**. I still wonder how much of this whole debacle just boils down to several months of sleep deprivation. I doubt it was just that since I've endured extended bouts of reduced sleep before without the catastrophic change in subjective experience that this involved, but sleep deprivation was certainly a catalyst to the whole thing.

6. **Get counseling if you need it**. If you're not able to make progress on your own, reach out to a professional who can help you. Yes, doing so will make you feel very vulnerable, and yes, if others learn about what you're going through, it might lead to awkward conversations or hasty judgments on their part. But this is your life. Is it really worth suffering so much (or even dying) just to avoid the possibility that some other people make hurtful judgments about you? Surely not: your life is too valuable. A lot of people suck, but don't let those people be the reason you don't seek help.

Obviously, there is more that could be done, but this exhausts what I have learned from personal experience. I want to conclude with two additional thoughts. First, the timing of this experience has made me acutely aware of how vulnerable early career scholars are to depression and the like. After graduate school, they are likely to move halfway across the country (or further) and often to places where they have few friends or acquaintances. They are likely to be in a temporary position of some sort and have uncertain long-term career prospects. Because they are likely to be on the job market again in the near future or on the tenure clock, they are probably under significant pressure to produce quality research and continue to improve their teaching. They are likely to be at an age where it has become harder to form meaningful friendships and one where biological realities necessitate starting a family soon if they want to have one.

On the whole, early career scholars are likely to have a limited or fractured social support network and are probably working under incredibly stressful and demanding conditions. These factors increase the risk of a bout with mental illness. For those (like myself) who have emerged from such bouts, we are left to wonder whether the pursuit of an academic career warrants so much suffering and sadness and the risk of its recurrence. Is it really worth it? I've not yet reached an answer.

Second, I know that there are some people reading this who are caught in the snare of the shadow self – and probably many more who were in such a position in the past. You may feel worthless. You may think no one cares about your work or your life. You may think your work is not good enough – that it will never be good enough – to earn others' approval or land you the job you want. You might feel weak and powerless. You might wonder whether you wasted your

twenties in graduate school just to have a career that you'll ultimately end up hating. You may wake up every day thinking it can't get worse… only to be proven wrong again and again.

But remember this: <u>you are not alone</u>. There are lots of other people in similar circumstances and lots of people who are willing to support you when you're down. As tempting as it might be to try to stick things out on your own, remember that real strength sometimes manifests not in managing to do everything yourself but in having the courage to ask for help when you really need it.