Philosophy Conferences: A Beginner's Guide
Jordan MacKenzie

Congratulations! You've produced a paper that you actually really like! Now it's time to take that paper on the road by submitting it to philosophy conferences. Below, you'll find a handy how-to manual that will talk you through the basics of philosophy conference submissions.

Some Preliminaries
Before they submit their work to journals, philosophers often present draft papers at conferences. Conferences serve a number of important functions:
- They give philosophers a venue for receiving feedback on in-progress papers
- They provide networking opportunities
- They're just really fun

There are two main 'types' of philosophy conferences: **generalist conferences** (that accept papers on all sorts of philosophical topics) and **specialist conferences** (that accept papers only on a narrow topic or set of topics). Most philosophy conferences are open to anyone working in the field: some are only open to **graduate students** and some are (very rarely) only open to faculty, or are invite-only. Conferences range in size from just a handful of participants (e.g. super niche specialist conferences) to hundreds of participants (e.g. the American Philosophical Association conferences). Large conferences usually run with multiple concurrent **panels** on different talks.

If your paper is accepted to a conference, you may be assigned a **commentator** and a **moderator**. A commentator is a person who will write and present a short commentary on your paper. A moderator is a person who will introduce you to your audience, and moderate your Question and Answer (Q&A) period. If your paper is rejected, you may be asked to serve as a commentator or moderator for someone else's paper. This is a great opportunity to experience what a philosophy conference is like without the pressure of having to give a full talk.

Conference presentations commonly range in length from 15 minutes to one hour. They are usually then followed by a Q&A period in which audience members will ask you questions about your presentation.

Some conferences run '**poster presentation**' sessions. If you are accepted to give a poster presentation, you will not have to present a talk. Instead, you'll prepare a poster summarizing the content of your paper. Conference participants will have a chance to ask you questions about your poster during the conference.

Where to Send Your Paper
Philosophy conferences usually advertise by putting out a **Call for Papers** ('**CFP**'). This is a description of what sorts of papers they'd like to receive for the conference.

Most CFPS are advertised on this site: https://philevents.org/. Some more 'continental' conferences advertise their conferences here: https://www.spep.org/resources/calls-for-papers/. European conferences are generally advertised on the 'Liverpool List'. You can join the list by going to their website (https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/philosophy/philos-l/) or by following them on Facebook (search 'Philos-L').

In my experiences, philosophical society conferences (like the APA) often only advertise their CFPs on their websites. Here are a few links to various societies' CFPs:
- The American Philosophical Association: https://www.apaonline.org/page/importantdates
- The Philosophy of Science Association: https://www.philsci.org/conference.php
- The Canadian Philosophical Association: https://www.acpcpa.ca/cpages/calls
- The American Society for Aesthetics: https://aesthetics-online.org/page/cfp

What to Submit to Conferences
Different CFPs ask for different things. Most commonly, you'll be asked to send one of the following types of documents:
- **A 3,000 word paper**: this is the standard submission length for APA conferences
- **A 5,000 word paper**: smaller, more specialized conferences often accept this length; APAs also accept a few papers of this length
- **A long abstract (approx. 750-1200 words)**: this is a common submission request; to write a long abstract, I basically take the introduction to my paper and provide more detail re: what happens in each section
- **A short abstract (approx. 200-500 words)**: this is a very rare submission format. In my experience, it is more common in bioethics conferences than philosophy conferences
- **A commentator application**: the APA gives people the opportunity to sign up to be a commentator for an accepted paper. To do this, you just have to fill out a form available here: https://www.apaonline.org/news/568819/Call-for-chairs-and-commentators-2022-Eastern-Division-meeting.htm

Here are a few general pieces of advice to determine whether your paper is 'conference ready'
- Don't assume that you're a good judge of this—you're still learning how conferences work, and we're often bad judges of our work
- Instead, talk to a trusted professor

- It's okay if the paper that you've written is too long—you can always cut it down before submitting it to conferences
- Rejection is a part of the game—it's good to get used to it early
  - Your first conference rejection will *suck*. You won't even remember your fifth rejection. Ask me how I know this.

How to Fund Your Conference Attendance

Conferences commonly have various expenses attached to them:
- Travel (plane, gas, parking etc.)
- Accommodations (Hotel, AirBNB etc.)
- Food
- Registration fees
- Society membership fees

Here are some ways that you can mitigate these costs:
- Check to see if the conference has graduate travel funding available
- Check out the GPSS travel fund: https://gpss.vt.edu/programs/tfp.html
  - Note: they announce their funding cycles here: https://webapps.graduateschool.vt.edu/glcweekly/
- If GPSS funding is not available, contact your Department Chair—we also have funding available
- Coordinate with other graduate students to apply to the same conference (multiple participants from VT usually equals cheaper travel and accommodations)
  - Note: this works *especially well* for APAs
- Submit your work to online conferences (thanks to COVID, there are a lot of these!)
- Submit your work to regional conferences:
  - Virginia Philosophical Association (https://sites.google.com/site/virginiaphilosophy/home?authuser=0)
  - North Carolina Philosophical Society (https://ncps.nomadcyb.org/)
- Submit your work to conferences in locations where you have friends/family
- Pack food for breakfast and lunch
- Avoid staying at the official conference hotel (nearby hotels are often cheaper)

How to Prepare for a Conference
Congratulations! Your paper got accepted! What next?

First, make sure you're clear on the details of the conference and your presentation:
- When is the conference? Where is it taking place?
- How are you going to get there? When will you be arriving and departing?
- Is graduate funding available? If not, have you contacted GPSS and the department?
- When will you be giving your presentation?
- Do you have a commentator? And if so, when do you need to send them your comments?
- Will you have access to a projector, and if so, does it require a laptop?
- Do you need any accommodations (e.g. dietary, mobility etc.)? If so, do you know who to contact about them? (In general, the conference organizer is usually the person to talk to—but when in doubt, ask me and I'll help you figure it out)

Next, start preparing your presentation. Here are a few tips for a successful presentation:
- Don't read your paper—instead, aim to talk through your paper
    - To do this, try to convert your paper to an outline and then practice talking through that outline
- Be wary of time, and don't cover too much
    - You might not have time to present *everything* that appears in your paper—that's okay!
    - If so, you'll have to make decisions about what to cut: is there an objection you don't really need to handle? Some background information that you can gloss over?
    - Whatever you do, don't try to cover everything by talking quickly
- Be *really clear* about your main points
    - What do you want the audience to take away from your presentation? What are the key argumentative moves?
    - Sign-posting is a godsend in oral presentations
- Prepare a visual aid for your audience—either a PowerPoint or a handout
    - If you'd like to prepare a Powerpoint, double check that the conference is AV-equipped
    - If you'd like to prepare a handout, make sure you print out copies *before* getting to the conference
- Practice your presentation before you get to the conference
    - Consider getting a group of friends together for a practice run, or booking a Brown Bag Work In Progress Talk in our department

Once You're at the Conference

You've made it to the conference, and you're ready to present! Here are a few pieces of conference etiquette to keep in mind:

- **Attire**: generally ranges from 'casual' to 'business casual' (https://resources.twc.edu/articles/what-should-i-wear-to-work)
  - When in doubt, go with business casual
- **Attendance**: at smaller conferences, you'll be expected to attend all/almost all of the talks. At larger conferences, you can get away with missing some sessions.
- **Networking**: One of the best things about conferences is that they give you a chance to meet other philosophers. Try to make a good impression:
  - Be friendly and approachable rather than aggressive and standoffish
  - Show excitement for other peoples' work—the goal is to come across as an engaged interlocutor, not an arrogant git
  - Try to meet new people—don't just cling to the people you know
  - If you're nervous about meeting new people, ask the people you already know to introduce you
  - If you don't know anybody at the conference, talk to me: I can see if I (or another faculty member) can put you in touch with someone *we* know
- **The Q&A Period**: be an engaged participant and try to ask questions. These questions can be *critical*, but they shouldn't be *mean*. Resist the urge to ask multiple follow-ups.

After the Conference

You made it to the end of the conference! Here are a few steps to wrap things up:

- After you present, try to write down a list of the feedback you received
  - This will help you make revisions to your paper down the road
- Consider adding people you've met to Facebook (if you use it for professional purposes) or PhilPeople (https://philpeople.org/).
- If someone has invited you to follow up with them via email (e.g. they've offered to send you a paper or read over your next draft), take them up on it!
- Add the conference presentation to your CV
- Tell us about it—we love to hear about our students' conference experiences