

GUIDANCE FOR PHILOSOPHY JOB SEEKERS

Prepared by the APA Committee
on Academic Careers and Placement



American
Philosophical
Association

This guide offers some advice to those seeking jobs in philosophy. Like all advice it is to be taken with a grain of salt. It is based on the collective wisdom of the APA's Committee on Academic Careers and Placement in fall 2004 (Larry May [chair], Andrew Light, Frank Ryan, Abby Wilkerson, Melissa Zinkin, Nancy Holland, Rebecca Copenhaver, Mark Timmons, David Tuncellito) and was revised in 2013 by the committee's then-chair, David Hoekema, and the APA executive director, Amy Ferrer. Collective wisdom is probably somewhat less controversial than collective punishment, but more controversial than almost everything else. Nonetheless, we hope that some of what we recommend will prove helpful to some of you, some of the time. Job seeking is one of the most difficult things that people can engage in. Anything that reduces that difficulty has value.



Guidance for Philosophy Job Seekers

1. WHEN TO START THINKING ABOUT JOBS

It is never too early to start thinking about the job market. During your first years in graduate school you should be thinking about which papers your teachers have liked. After the end of term, take the paper back to the professor who liked it and ask two questions:

- What can I do to improve this paper and make it marketable for a conference or for publication?
- Which conference or journal would be best suited for a paper like mine?

You don't need to do a lot of this. One or two of your best essays, sent first to a conference and then to a journal, will do nicely. Only send out your very best work to conferences, for that is what you want to be remembered for.

In addition, in these early years in graduate school, you should try to put together a good assortment of courses that you have TA-ed for or taught independently. You should try to TA for all of the major introductory courses (introduction to philosophy, ethics, logic and critical thinking) as well as some specialized or advanced courses in your areas of specialization and competence. At some universities, such as the large state schools, the trick will be to limit your teaching so that you can get good writing done. At other schools, you may have to be creative to get enough teaching experience (try contacting small colleges and community colleges in your area). Most importantly, keep your teaching evaluations from these courses. Or if course evaluations do not routinely have students evaluate TAs, design your own and administer it during the last week of classes (then have a departmental secretary collect and hold them for you until

grades are turned in so students don't think you will retaliate against them).

A note of caution: Given the current and foreseeable demand for low-paid adjunct courses it can be very tempting to take on a large amount of adjunct teaching. Given the large number of graduate students seeking such teaching it can also be very tempting to take every course that is offered to you in order to ensure your place in the adjunct pool. The result sometimes can be a vicious cycle of taking more and more low-paid adjunct teaching that can impede your ability to finish your dissertation.

All other things being equal, and they hardly ever are, you could also use the early years in graduate school to get a bit (but only a bit) of service or administrative experience. The easiest here is to volunteer for a departmental committee, like the colloquium or admissions committee. If there are opportunities to work with a university administrator such as a dean or assistant provost on a special project, by all means take them, and if appropriate ask your supervisor to add a recommendation letter to your portfolio when you apply for jobs later. Do not (repeat: do not) spend much time at this. Service is clearly a very distant third-place, after research and teaching, for the vast majority of jobs. No one gets hired on the basis of service, standing alone, unless you want to be hired into an administrative job. Remember too that one should be cautious about spending too much time on departmental or campus politics. Indeed, try to stay out of departmental politics altogether, which can come back to bite you. You are a transient in graduate school, and should not treat this as a permanent position.

It is a good idea to join the APA as soon as you can—the rates for student members are very low. And make sure to visit the PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers website—both APA members and non-members can view job listings. When reviewing PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers, you can scan through it and think to yourself: Do any of these jobs sound interesting to me? What do I need to do to stand the best chance of getting the job I like the most? Note whether there are any such jobs. If not, consider another career. If so, notice what combinations of things employers are looking for (for example, many jobs in philosophy of science or philosophy of mind involve teaching logic courses, and many positions in ethical theory or political philosophy include some courses in applied ethics).

Another good source of experience and professional contacts can be found in the numerous smaller specialized societies organized around particular sub-fields of philosophy, affinity groups, or particular periods or figures, such as the Society for Women in Philosophy, the International Society for

Environmental Ethics, or the Society for Realist/Antirealist Discussion. Such organizations can be invaluable for helping to establish you in the field and providing a set of interlocutors who can improve your work. One of the best ways to find such organizations is to survey the group meetings listings in the program for each divisional APA conference.

In general, use the early years in graduate school to learn as much philosophy as you can. Also, begin to develop a specialty in philosophy, and perhaps also begin to develop a competence outside of philosophy, such as political science or computer science (although for certain jobs you might not want to highlight this). Use these early years to figure out if you really want to spend your life in a philosophy department, and to begin to get a sense of what it means to be a professional philosopher. Being a philosopher may be the fulfillment of your dreams, but neither philosophers nor poets can live on dreams and words alone. You will need to support yourself as a philosopher by practicing a profession, possibly the profession of teaching and writing philosophy. That may sound less romantic than just being a philosopher, but it is a very satisfying profession to pursue.

2. WHEN TO GO INTO THE MARKET

One of the most important decisions you will make is when to go into the philosophy job market. This is especially important because many graduate students go in too early and waste years of their lives. The job search process is a nearly full-time job. So if you go in early and you don't have enough of your dissertation done, you can find yourself six months later with no job prospects and no more done on your dissertation than when you started. Do this for a couple of years and you nearly place yourself out of the market by being too long in graduate school—taking too long to finish a dissertation is almost always seen as a bad sign of how long it will take you to finish anything else.

So, when is it optimal to go into the job market? While this varies a bit, the best time is when you are nearly done with your dissertation. "Nearly done" is a relative term. If you have a five-chapter dissertation, "nearly done" can mean four chapters drafted and approved by your committee, and the other chapter at least begun. Or it can mean, all five chapters drafted and some fairly minor revisions needed. At bare minimum, you need three of those five chapters done by early September. The main reason for this is that you need your dissertation committee chair to say, in a letter he or she will write in late September, "Yes, Jones will be done and ready to start undistracted in the fall." But this is not enough,

since everyone supervising a dissertation is likely to say this in a letter, to prevent the application from being discarded immediately. For that reason the committee chair must cite evidence to back up this claim, such as that all five chapters are drafted and only need minor revisions, or some such. Optimally, the letter from your committee chair will say: "We have set December 8 as the defense date." This is optimal because by the time you get to the Eastern Division meeting in late December, folks will know whether you are really done or not. January defense dates are good as well, because departments will be making hiring decisions by late January or early February, typically.

In normal years there are a lot more applicants for jobs in philosophy than there are jobs. So, employers are looking for reasons to throw out applications. The first cut at most schools is "whether the candidate is done, or will be done by September." Unless you can make a strong case for this, and your dissertation committee chair can back you up, you are unlikely to make the first cut, and hence likely to have wasted six months or more. Don't delude yourself. Many people find that it takes about two months of relatively uninterrupted time to draft a good chapter, which means it will take six months to draft about half of your dissertation, depending on the scope of your project and your other commitments. If you haven't started seriously writing your dissertation by March, you don't stand much of a chance of being more than halfway done by September. But also don't wait too long. While the national average is seven years from B.A. to completion of the Ph.D., if after completing your coursework you take longer than three years to write the dissertation, potential employers will start to wonder whether this is a sign that you will not be able to write enough in your probationary period to be able to get tenure. So, our best advice is not to go into the market until you are done with the dissertation, or at very least "nearly done."

3. THE SYSTEM

In America in philosophy, the majority of jobs are advertised in PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers in October and November and then first interviews (a half hour to an hour in length) are conducted at the APA Eastern Division meeting between Christmas and New Year's Day. In some cases, it is possible to request an interview on site at the meeting; however, the great majority of interviews are arranged in advance. If you are ranked high among convention interviews you may be invited to campus for a second-stage interview, which will be more intensive and will probably be spread over two days that will include meeting all the members of the department and presenting a paper, or teaching a class, or both. Most

departments select two or three candidates and pay their expenses for this final interview. There are also jobs advertised after New Year's Day, although far fewer than before New Year's. These jobs will typically have their first interviews at the Pacific or Central Division meetings in late March or late April respectively. But many of these jobs will not be tenure track, but instead they are rather late announcements for temporary positions of one or more years. Initial interviews may be conducted (rarely) by telephone or (more frequently) using online video. If you are seriously on the market, you should plan to go to the APA Eastern Division meeting and apply to jobs posted on the PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers website in October and November, and then keep applying throughout the year.

Many graduate students go to their first APA meeting when they go on the job market. While this is certainly understandable due to financial constraints, we strongly advise you to attend a meeting of the APA prior to going on the market. In particular, going to an Eastern APA meeting may help you avoid the "shell shock" of going to one of these meetings only when it "counts." We would also hope that attending these meetings without the pressure of being on the market will help you see the positive aspects of these conferences, especially the ability to reconnect with friends in the field and make new friends that you otherwise might not see in the academic year. Also, reading a paper or being a commentator might help get you a job in the following years. For this reason, we recommend submitting papers to the APA meeting(s) of your choice. Having one or more papers accepted to an APA meeting can be beneficial to your CV.

4. THE CURRICULUM VITAE

One of the main ways to tell whether you are ready to go on the market is whether you can put together a respectable curriculum vitae (CV) by early September. A vita is simply an academic resume, but it is not really very simple at all. You should show your vita to various faculty members and put it through the kind of drafting process that you would use for a term paper. For most applicants, the vita should be two to three pages long, with three to four pages for dissertation abstract and summary of teaching evaluations as supplements to the vita.

- (a) Address – list your departmental and home addresses and phone numbers. Also list where you can be reached right up to the beginning of the APA's Eastern Division meeting.
- (b) Area of specialization – list two or three areas of philosophy that you are especially qualified in. The dissertation is the primary,

often only, basis for proof of a specialization. To figure out what would be good combinations of specialization, consult back issues of *Jobs for Philosophers* and then make sure that your dissertation really does cover those areas.

- (c) Area of competence – list four or five areas of philosophy that you are ready to offer courses in, different from your specialized areas. The best way to demonstrate this is in terms of what you have taught or TA-ed.
- (d) Publications or conference presentations – this could be one area of the vita or several, depending on what you have accomplished. Do not pad your vita with very minor things (or optimally, list them under a separate category for minor publications). List the most significant first—they don't need to be in chronological order. Make sure to indicate whether something was peer reviewed.
- (e) Teaching experience – list TA experience in a separate category from independent teaching. List the dates and places of the experience.
- (f) Special honors and awards – list whatever seems relevant to a job search in philosophy. Mainly focus on things you earned in graduate school.
- (g) Recommendation writers – list the names of all of those who will write letters for you and their addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers. This list should include all three (or four) members of your primary dissertation committee, as well as someone who will write specifically about your teaching—preferably someone who has good first-hand experience of it. And it is sometimes an especially good thing to be able to have someone write for you who is not a faculty member at your department or school. Those letters are more believable since the reputation of the recommendation writer is not tied up with whether you get a job or not. For example, if you give a conference paper and have a commentator who liked the paper, ask that person to write a letter for you; act similarly for a paper you have written about a prominent philosopher who has read your work and appreciated it, but such letters are limited in scope. It often is a good idea to give to prospective letter writers a letter from you that indicates what things you'd like them to cover in the recommendation, and give them lots of time—ask them by September 1.

- (h) List of graduate courses taken – list all courses (including those you audited) along with the name of the professor and the semester taken. It is often a good idea to group these by subject areas rather than merely to present them chronologically. DO NOT LIST GRADES—no one cares anymore.
- (i) Summary of selected course evaluations – on no more than two sheets of paper, list five or six sets of teaching evaluations, displayed in graphic form that is easy to read.
- (j) Dissertation abstract – on one or two sheets of paper give a detailed description of the arguments of the dissertation. Provide a summary paragraph and long paragraphs on each chapter. [NOTE: if you can't easily provide this abstract then you are definitely not ready to go on the market.]

It is hard to stress enough how important it is to get the vita just right. The trick is not to pad the vita and yet to list all of the important stuff about your fledgling professional life.

On a more mundane subject, normal white paper and average size typeface work best. This is why you need lots of feedback and redraftings to get it right. If you have any questions about how you appear through the vita, ask people you can trust to give you frank advice, and then, with several such pieces of advice, make a decision about how you want to appear.

Do not waste your time applying for jobs that list an AOS different from the ones you list on the vita.

5. THE COVER LETTER

The cover letter for each job application should basically be a one-page attempt to demonstrate that you fit the job description. This means that you should highlight aspects of the vita that demonstrate your qualifications for the things mentioned in the job ad. You should have a paragraph on teaching and a paragraph on research, at bare minimum.

The cover letter is sometimes the only thing that members of a hiring committee read, so take your time with it and try to convey as much information as you can in a page or so without being excessively wordy or using terms and expressions that may be unique to a particular sub-field of philosophy. Keep in mind that most people reading this letter will not

be working in the specialty area in which you work. It is not a problem to go over one page in length, but remember that folks may not read the second page.

If at all possible, put the cover letter on departmental stationery. If you already have a job, this is easy. But if you are still in graduate school, most departments will let you use departmental stationery. If your department secretary complains about the cost of letterhead stock, merely ask for one sheet, and then photocopy it and print your covering letter on the photocopied departmental letterhead.

6. THE WRITING SAMPLE

You will need to supply at least one writing sample with each application. It is commonly thought that the writing sample should come from the dissertation. If it does not, people may wonder whether the dissertation is indeed almost done. You should take a chapter from the dissertation and make it a free-standing 25-page paper. If you have a paper that has been accepted for publication, you should include this as well; but especially if it is not from the dissertation, this should be included in addition to, not instead of, the dissertation chapter.

In all cases, the writing sample should be your very best work. After all, someone may actually read it and base the whole interview on it. How embarrassing it will be for you if you really don't think that its thesis is defensible anymore. Writing samples should be very carefully edited for typos and infelicities of style, since this is the only piece of your work members of a hiring committee are likely to see. You should never send out a writing sample that has not been seen, and critiqued, by several people in your field, even if these are only fellow graduate students. Do not assume that even if people have seen earlier drafts of the writing sample, say when it was merely a chapter, that is good enough. As with everything else you send out for the purposes of getting a job, only send things out that others have looked at for you in advance. [Note: Your writing sample should not be the same as the professional paper you deliver on campus, lest folks think that you only have one good idea.]

7. WHICH SCHOOLS TO APPLY TO

Our standard advice is that if you are serious about the job market you should be able to apply to 30–80 jobs before Christmas. Of course, it is a waste of everyone's time to apply to jobs that you are not qualified for,

or for which you do not have the right AOS. But so many jobs list open specializations, or merely list courses to be taught, that it shouldn't be hard to find quite a number of jobs that one is qualified for out of the postings on the PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers website in October and November.

Many students decide to do a more limited search. In order to accomplish this goal they try to determine which departments are most likely to hire them, and then only apply to those schools. For instance, if someone really wants to teach applied ethics, then one often applies only to jobs that list applied ethics as an AOS, rather than also to jobs that list ethical theory or political philosophy as specializations. In deciding whether to pursue this strategy, you should realize that departments often change their minds about precisely what they want. If you do a limited search, still apply to as many jobs as you can from those that you are qualified for. Remember that you don't have to take every job that is offered, but unless you get an offer from somewhere you won't get a job at all.

8. PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Before going to the APA Eastern Division meeting for the first round of job interviews, you should first have a mock interview. If this is not a regular feature of your graduate program, mock interviews are easy to organize on your own. Merely find two or three faculty members, give them a copy of your vita a few minutes in advance (to make it seem like the real thing) and have them sit in a room with you for an hour and role-play.

The first half of the interview should be about research, and it should begin with someone asking you to describe your dissertation in about ten minutes. The spiel should be memorized and well-rehearsed in front of a mirror. Of course, you will rarely get through ten minutes before questions start flying. And that's good—since the whole point of an interview is to have a conversation where three things are learned: how good a philosopher you are, what kind of a teacher you are likely to be, and whether you will be a good conversationalist as a colleague. Since you won't normally be allowed to finish the spiel, front-load it with the most interesting ideas.

The second half of the mock interview, like most of the real interviews you will face, should be focused on teaching. You should come prepared to discuss in detail how you would teach courses that would fall both within and outside your areas of specialization and competence. Be prepared to explain what you think students should get out of a given course in order

to motivate your teaching approach. Prepare elaborately for these mock interviews, as well as for the real one, and bring sample syllabi for a host of courses you are likely to be asked to teach.

At the mock interview, those mocking you should put on different hats, preferably trying to simulate folks who will indeed interview you. For that reason, wait to do this until early to middle December so it is likely that you will have started to hear from schools. Also, ask the mockers to be brutally frank with you. A lot of what goes wrong in interviews is easy to fix if you know about it in advance. It is easy to redo your spiel. And, if you display nervous habits—wringing your hands or biting your lip, for example—this can easily be corrected once you know it. If you look distracted, you can sit up straight and then lean forward. If you look too intense or nervous, you can slide down in the chair and slump a little. If you look too buttoned-up, unbutton; if you look too laid-back, button-up, etc.

When you get interviews, go onto the departmental website and look at the courses that would naturally fall into your specialization and competence. It is also a good idea to try to get a sense of what type of school it is. And if this is a “plum” job for you, you might want to read some things that people in the department, especially those in your area, have written.

At nearly every real interview, you will be asked if you have any questions for them, so make that part of the mock interview as well. If you don’t know this you can be flummoxed by this question—so have one or two questions, ideally based on your knowledge of the department and the curriculum (e.g., “Are your 400-level courses only upper level undergraduate courses or are there both graduate students and undergraduate students in these courses?”). Don’t be too provocative here and generally stay away from salary issues.

Very often you will be asked what your next project will be, now that you are nearing the end of your dissertation—you don’t have to have a super-detailed answer to this, but you should have some answer. Don’t try to make something up on the spur of the moment. A good strategy is to work up a project that spins off the dissertation, perhaps writing the chapter you never got to, or an article that is a natural follow-up to the dissertation. That way you can still talk about stuff you know something about.

9. WHAT TO WEAR

Our advice about what to wear is look professional, take cues from other candidates and from interviewers at the meeting, and be comfortable.

Suits are not required, but jackets (with either a skirt or slacks, for women) are recommended. Avoid anything loud or conspicuous: you want to be remembered for what you said about your dissertation and your approach to teaching, not for the loud tie or flamboyant scarf you were wearing. Expectations differ somewhat from one city and one convention to another: the Eastern Division tends toward more formality (neckties for men, business suits for women), the Central and Pacific toward informal but still professional options, like a casual Friday in an office. Wear comfortable clothes that fit you well—the interview process is uncomfortable enough no matter what you wear.

10. GENERAL CONVENTION ADVICE

If you can afford it, plan to spend two or three nights at the hotel where the convention occurs. And it is best not to have a roommate, unless it is someone you really trust. Things will be stressful enough without having anywhere to escape to (and watch cartoons, or the weather channel, or whatever relaxes you) between interviews. Also, for two of the evenings there will be receptions (still called “smokers” by some attendees, even though there hasn’t been any smoke or fire for many years) in the evening, often going on until late hours, and it is best not to have to navigate mass transit after midnight.

Generally, drink little if any alcohol during the convention. And try to stay away from folks who have been drinking and have interviewed you. Aside from this advice, though, there is nothing wrong with trying to find folks who interviewed you later in the day at the receptions. Many a job has been secured with an extra effort at finding and conversing with folks where you effectively get a second interview to only one for your competitors. Of course, don’t make a pest out of yourself. When you approach, ask if it is OK to continue the conversation that was begun earlier. Many departments make finding them at the reception easy by reserving a table in the large hall where these events occur. When you enter the hall the APA will provide a list of the numbered tables that have been reserved by various departments. When departments have reserved a table they are signaling in part that they are encouraging candidates to stop by for a chat after the interview, so you are welcome to come by.

11. APRÉS CONVENTION

After the convention go back home and prepare a campus job talk. Better yet, you should have had such a talk already planned out in October. In

any event, you should not delay doing this since you might get a call only a few days after the meetings asking you to fly out for a campus visit. Almost everyone wants either a formal or informal paper, and you should get one ready right away just in case. It is also a good idea to go over the convention with your placement director or mentor and see if follow-up emails might be warranted. Also try to set up a mock job talk—round up your friends and stray faculty members and make them sit down for an hour with you while you do a dress rehearsal.

If you get a job offer and still haven't heard from a school you prefer, call them up. Nothing is lost here. If they don't want you, and they have any manners at all, then they'll let you down gently. But the worst thing is if they do want you but are merely being slow and you don't give them enough notice about a deadline for another job.

12. LATE BREAKING JOBS AND PERSISTENCE

Keep yourself open to the possibility that nothing will happen as a result of the first round of job interviews. Keep sending out applications until you are sure you'll be employed. This is psychologically hard to do, but it is necessary. Many of our students have gotten jobs in the second or third round, after the competition has diminished a bit. Those jobs are no less desirable, often, than those that interview at the Eastern. And always remember, you don't have to stay in the same position forever.

As was briefly mentioned above, some jobs that are advertised in the fall, and comparatively more advertised in the spring, are not tenure-track but limited term appointments for a year or more. These jobs can be important stepping-stones to a good tenure-track job. While many if not most of these limited term positions are for sabbatical replacements and so not renewable, some can become gateways for permanent positions at the same institution. In addition, having letters of reference from members of a department who have gotten to know you as a colleague, rather than as a grad student, can be very valuable in helping you to land a tenure-track job.

It is also increasingly common for departments to advertise full time postdoctoral fellowships of one to three years. You might even consider looking for and taking one of these positions rather than initially seeking a tenure-track job. Most postdocs do not carry full-time teaching responsibilities and will allow you to build a strong record of publications. Helpful hint: Many postdoctoral positions are not advertised in PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers when they are part of a college or university's on-

going “society of fellows” program or part of an established research center. Those interested in such positions should consult the job listings in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and individual university websites.

13. PROBLEMS

If problems (of harassment, intimidation, or general annoyance) occur, talk to the APA staff or to the placement ombudsperson or APA ombudsperson for non-discrimination. It is simply unacceptable for any job candidate to be made to feel uncomfortable because of comments about physical appearance, and certainly about sex or race. There is no reason not to complain, and the APA will not treat such complaints lightly.

If you are disabled, your right to full access in every aspect of the placement process *ought* to be extended without question or repercussion, just as you should be able freely to disclose your disability status. The APA is working to address disability issues, as are many institutions. Candidates must not hesitate to request necessary accommodations, yet they may still have to strategize about disclosure or access requests. Most campuses, but not all, have by now made necessary accommodations for visitors in wheelchairs. But other accommodations needed for an effective campus visit, such as interpreter services for those with hearing impairments, and travel support for a personal assistant, may not be offered unless they are explicitly requested. Candidates should think carefully about how they will negotiate such issues. Currently, the APA will provide a quiet interview room for candidates or interviewers for whom the large common interviewing area is inaccessible for reasons of disability such as, but not limited to, deafness, hearing impairment, cognitive impairments, or speech impairments. Contact the placement service if you need this provision. Additional concerns related to access or ableist bias in the placement process may be taken up with the placement ombudsperson through the APA placement service or with the APA ombudsperson for nondiscrimination.



American Philosophical Association