

# Some advice for undergraduate students: On independent research and other things

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This document is written for undergraduate students who are interested in philosophy, and hopefully, aspire to pursue their graduate studies in the analytic tradition given this interest. Much of the advice below is based on my personal experience, which means that they will inevitably be biased and not replicable to a certain extent. I do, however, believe that some parts of my personal experience are a reflection of what every lover of philosophy will experience on their academic journey. I hope that this document will be of some help to you. If you have further questions, you can reach me at [2000014916@stu.pku.edu.cn](mailto:2000014916@stu.pku.edu.cn).

## Starting Out

### **Trying is the only way to know whether you like it or not.**

Everyone who ends up choosing a philosophy major will agree that philosophy is interesting to some extent, but statistically speaking, only a small portion will end up pursuing a graduate study in philosophy, and even fewer will choose to enter the academia. And nowadays, social media has done a great job to popularize how difficult it is to survive in the academia. Given this, it's natural to wonder, in your first or second year: do I like philosophy; or, more realistically, do I like philosophy enough to be an academic? To be honest, this is a Hard Question. I think only few people will be lucky enough to figure out a definitive answer before they have to make a decision – most simply live with it. However, this does not stop everyone from *trying* to figure it out, and neither should it stop you.

Pick a topic that interests you at the moment. It does not have to be a big or established question, and you don't need to know a lot about it to get interested. Talk to your professors. Utilize the academic opportunities that your college and department provide. Start a small project. I cannot guarantee that your puzzle will be solved along the way, but you will definitely know better about yourself. And it's ok to quit if you find out philosophy is not what your real passion is about – after all, knowing what you don't like is a crucial step in knowing what you like.

## In the process

### **Read while you think, not think after you read.**

Some people think that you have to know a lot about a topic before you are allowed to have your own ideas on it. This is absolutely wrong, as far as I am concerned. Yes, reading makes one knowledgeable, but understanding and memorization alone do not make good philosophers. Thinking does. Reading matters because it provides food for thought, so to speak, and because it saves you the time and effort to think about stuff that has already been thought about by the brightest minds. In the end, we read to think.

I used to wonder how on earth can a philosopher remember the subtle differences between technically almost indistinguishable positions, but I have gradually come to become sort of this “expert” in the small field that I write about. I come to learn that philosophers don’t deliberately recite claims made by others – they just naturally stay in your head once they become personally relevant to you. It’s just a matter of time one becomes an expert in the fields that she cares about.

### **Don’t be afraid of approaching big questions, don’t be afraid of making small points.**

Philosophy is attractive because we are allowed to ask big questions. But many start to lose this sense of grandeur when they start to tackle these questions. On one hand, big questions are hard to approach because they are simply too *big*. On the other, since *big* is almost synonymous with *old* in philosophy, a question’s being big means that countless philosophers, who are very likely to be way smarter than we are, have already thought and wrote about it. And the fact that these questions remain suggests those minds have not succeeded in answering them once and for all. Who are we to think that we can answer the questions that even Aristotle could not answer?

True, it’s very unlikely that any of us can do better philosopher than Aristotle. But this should not stop us from trying. And personally, I don’t think the secular consideration that “philosophers too need to publish and make a living” gives us a good reason to stay away from the big questions. Practically speaking, writing about what Alice says about what Bob says about what Carol says about Plato said is very unlikely to get you a publication. Theoretically speaking, philosophy essentially is about tackling big questions. I think this constitutes a big or a small part of why we were not satisfied with merely being on the school debate team (no offense) and chose to be philosophers, and we shouldn’t forget about that.

All of the above advocacy of “approaching big questions” is not meant to say that we should approach big questions in a “big” way. We don’t and many of us can’t. When we start out with the ambition of answering the big question whether physicalism is true – we should, most likely we end up writing a paper about, for example, what Chalmers means

by “physicalism” in his 2004 paper. This is totally fine. In fact, I think that is exactly how most of the greatest contributions in contemporary analytic philosophy kick off. Small and meticulous work add up to big contributions.

### **There is value in originality per se.**

As one of my professors correctly noticed, most of our original ideas start out pretty crappy. They are likely to be overambitious, defeated by simple counterexamples, already refuted by some philosopher 10 years ago, subject to major logical fallacies, etc. I think we stress this point less than we should. So let me stress it again here: *ALL of us have crappy ideas*, which, I presume, including those great philosophers that we all look up to. (In support of this point, you can check out the personal page of Eric Mandelbaum, the CUNY professor, where he posted his “CV of failures”.<sup>1</sup>) So there is really nothing terrifying about having crappy ideas – it’s an indispensable part of our lives, and especially, the life of a philosopher. And as hard as it might be to refrain from being afraid of showing everyone your crappy original ideas, you shouldn’t stop having them and showing them. After all, only philosophers have the privilege of being originally stupid – you might sound stupid, but at least you are stupid *in an original way*, and originality per se is rewarded in philosophy. At some point, we will all be lucky enough to meet an audience that is generous and smart enough to see in our crappy ideas the potential we could have never seen on our own. And that, I think, is what motivates this whole original though sometimes “stupid” enterprise.

## **Writing a paper**

### **Good philosophy takes time and hard work.**

This point is related to what I said above about crappy original ideas. If it is not talent alone that distinguishes great philosophers from mediocre ones, what is? I think it’s hard work. In humanities, people have this impression that good work is all about ideas, which comes into shape in the flash of a light when you sit comfortably in your backyard doing nothing. This is false. Hard work matters in (analytic) philosophy as much as in any other academic pursuits. The only special thing about philosophy is probably that, the highest compliment for hard work is “natural”, an adjective that is considered to be quite the opposite of “deliberate hard work”. But things that seems natural don’t come naturally, especially in philosophy. It took me five significantly different drafts and nearly two months to get the comment “it flows naturally” from my professor about my writing sample. So unless you are a genius, you have to work really hard to look effortless – and you should.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ericmandelbaum.com/primer-for-working-with-me>

## **One thing at a time.**

This is a rather technical point related to my own experience of writing my sample for grad school applications, but I do think it hints at a deeper point about choice and letting go in the general academic setting. Let me start with some writing tips. If you have a really cool idea that doesn't really fit into a paper, but it's just so cool, delete it completely. Don't leave it in the paper.<sup>2</sup> I've been there, and I know how bad it feels. But uneasy feelings do not constitute a reason to place something at somewhere it does not belong. If you feel that you need something *irrelevant* in your paper, that is probably a sign that the *relevant* part is not strong enough yet. Use your time and energy to improve that, instead of trying to squeeze the irrelevant part in.

Tying to general academic advice, I think there is a tendency among undergraduates to talk about *everything* they find interesting in a single paper. This way of writing is more suitable for personal biography than for academic philosophy. Try to tackle one thing at a time. Precise focus gives you depth, which is all that academic philosophy is about. And don't be afraid that you might not get the chance to write about other things that you are interested in, or the time that you spend in contemplating those topics will be for nothing. Here, I share with all of you who feel bad about deleting what my professor said to me: this is likely to be the *first* time that you write, not the *last* time. As long as you want, you will have all the time to write about everything that you are interested in.

## **Dealing with the feeling of uneasiness**

Sometimes they say it's the feeling of uneasiness that drives philosopher's thinking. I think it's true. Sometimes I get interested in certain philosophical questions because they lead to counterintuitive conclusions that are simply counterintuitive. Other times, because the fact that some questions seem unsolvable is just annoying. Given this, it's natural to assume that the feeling of uneasiness always stays with the philosopher – after all, they are what drives philosophical inquiry. This I don't agree with. I think the problem is more complex than that. It's possible to distinguish between two kinds of uneasiness – the general uneasiness that is sometimes said to characterize philosophy, and the specific uneasiness that you feel towards your idea. I don't think that the latter kind of uneasiness always stays with the philosopher. If you feel uneasy about your idea, this is a sign that it is *not there yet*. Work on it until you no longer feel uneasy about it. Don't use the inevitable general uneasiness as an excuse. You will know what it is like to liberate oneself from the specific uneasiness while staying in the general uneasiness setting – I know it sounds contradictory, but it feels amazing.

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<sup>2</sup> It's a brilliant piece of writing advice that I read from the Harvard philosopher Bernhard Nickel. There is an amazing grad school application guide on his homepage: <https://scholar.harvard.edu/bernhardnickel>.

## Asking and dealing with feedbacks

### Reach out bravely.

Philosophy is a collaborative enterprise. We shouldn't forget about this even if when we don't work in laboratories and don't usually have the collaborator's name next to ours when we publish (though this is becoming more and more common). Thinking alone can be painful sometimes, and we should be grateful that we've got company that share our passion and interest in eccentric questions.

Value your opponents. It is partly their dedication to oppose what you are trying to argue that gives your arguments significance. Talk to them and listen to what they have to say carefully. They are the few people on this planet that would really read your paper line by line and have the required capacity and passion to understand your ideas. Don't be afraid to be criticized by them. We all know that criticisms make better philosophers. Also, if you think about it from a different perspective, they are helping you to write the 'Objection' section.

Finally, a more practical tip concerning asking for feedbacks concerning writing sample, stolen from Prof. Nickel's website: *your professors are busy people, but it is not your job to protect their time*. I don't know about professors, but at least I myself would be very glad to help someone who shares my enthusiasm for philosophy.

### It always your fault that people cannot understand.

Philosophy is notoriously abstract, and it's tempting to equate abstraction with obscurity. I don't think this is right, at least for analytic philosophy. When you present your ideas and arguments to a reasonably intelligent person who has the intention to understand what you are saying, yet he/she couldn't, you might want to rethink them. Drop the philosophical arrogance that "philosophy is simply too difficult for non-philosophers". A philosophical paper whose main idea cannot be understood by your mother is unlikely to be a very good one. As one of my professors once pointed out, the Holy Grail of undergraduate philosophical writing is "making people understand what you are arguing for" (perhaps also giving some reasons for it).

I should add a clarification that understanding and agreeing are different things, and that they should not be confused. That someone understands your claim and arguments does not entail that he/she agrees with it. But what is true but often neglected is that, most disagreement entails understanding. If someone disagrees with your claim and gives reasons for it, this is a sign that he/she understands your claim – something to be happy about.

Being clear and understandable is also crucial for presentation. When we give presentations about our own ideas, we aim to get useful feedback from others, not to impress them. Feedback wouldn't be possible if nobody understands what our ideas are. Thus, present your ideas in the simplest way. Making yourself vulnerable makes it easier

for others to help you, which in the end makes you stronger.

### **Be grateful and critical.**

If you reach out bravely, as I have strongly suggested you to, you will most likely get a lot of feedbacks. And most likely, there will be conflicting ones, and there will be ones that you think completely miss the point. First of all, you should be grateful for all of them. The fact that someone takes the time to read your paper shows that they care. But you should also critically evaluate feedbacks from kind-willed people, just as what you should do with any piece of philosophical text. Try your best to understand their complaints. If you can, improve your paper; if you cannot, forget about the complaints. As Prof. Nickels have mentioned, *philosophical writing requires lots of judgments calls. They're not obviously right or wrong. They're just yours.* After all, the people that you ask to read your paper will not be on the admission committee or be the journal reviewers. So take it easy if you decide at the end not to follow their advice.

### **Don't let positive feedbacks stop you from improving.**

Sometimes we get positive feedbacks from people that we really respect. For example, a famous professor commenting on a sentence “that’s a really good sentence”, or on a paragraph “I really like your idea”. The joy of being recognized makes it very difficult to rewrite that sentence and rethink that idea – let alone deleting them. But the hard call need to be made if we want to improve. If you think you have a better way of writing that “really good sentence”, rewrite it. If you think the idea that your professor “really likes” turns out to be problematic, delete it and come up with a better one. You should have the confidence that it is not *contingent* that you write good sentences and have great ideas – it’s what you can *consistently* do given your philosophical ability. If this is so, why let some random comments stop you from improving? Do what you think is right, and that professor will like your idea even more.

## **Final words**

Doing academic philosophical is painful and extremely joyful at the same time. Actually, it’s probably the pain in the process that endows it with meaning. It’s important to remember that pain is almost inevitable, but too much pain might be a warning. This balance is hard to describe, as I myself is still trying to figure it out. Or perhaps such balance is in principle impossible to be figured out, and all philosophers over the centuries have lived with the puzzle whether their choice qualified as a balanced one. This sounds very much like what philosophy is known for – understanding without definite answers. In any case, I am grateful for everything that happened and will happen on my philosophical journey, and I hope that my experience can be of some help to the readers who have been patient enough to read till this point. Good luck!