A Publishing Roundtable

The following is based on a 2023 ASA Rocky Mountain Division session on publishing.

How to Get Published in Philosophy
Jeanette Bicknell (Independent Scholar)

This advice is based on the advice I received as a graduate student and on my experience co-editing a special issue of JAAC with John A. Fisher.

When John and I reviewed the submissions that we received for the special issue on song and singing, a few things quickly became apparent. First, the best papers were good in every way. They were clearly written and well-argued, addressed a clear and important problem, and were scholarly without being scholastic. Reading unpublished work of such a high quality was inspiring and since then I’ve tried to make the work that I submit for publication as good as it can be. Second, just as the best papers stood out, it was also readily apparent which papers were not right for the special issue. A few were not even on the topic of songs or singing, which made for easy decisions.

In the best of all possible worlds, we would all submit for publication papers that were good in every way. Personally, I find that my own writing hardly ever meets this mark. I rely on feedback from friends, anonymous reviewers, and conference participants to write the best papers that I can.

Most of the papers submitted to the special issue fell into a middle category. They were good in some ways but missed the mark in others. These are the papers that would typically be given a verdict of “revise and resubmit.” Sometimes the problem addressed was not clear or compelling. Sometimes the arguments were not yet fully worked through. Sometimes important works of previous scholarship were not addressed.

Here is some of the advice that has served me well over the years:

1. Choose the right venue. As Mary Poppins said, “Well begun is half done.” If you have a paper on (say) Hegel’s aesthetics, send it to a journal that has previously published things on Hegel or on German Romanticism.
2. Join a conversation. Your work is more likely to be reviewed favourably if you can situate it within ongoing debates in the field. (If, like me, you find this advice hard to take, see below.)
3. Answer the question: Why should the reader care? If your work doesn’t fit into an existing conversation, start a new conversation. To do this you will need to make a case for why readers should be interested.
4. Select accessible examples. We all have our idiosyncratic favorite artists and works. When trying to be published in a mainstream journal, choose examples that, if not reasonably known by all, will at least be readily accessible.

5. Engage with (or at least, mention) relevant past scholarship. While your goal is an original contribution, it is important to be conversant with past scholarship on the problem you’re addressing. Defining a problem or topic sufficiently narrowly can help to narrow down the scope of relevant past scholarship.

6. Be persistent. Always accept the invitation to revise and resubmit. Don’t be put off by what may seem like excessively harsh reviewers’ comments. If the editors invite you to resubmit, it means that they found something positive in your work.

7. Have a Plan B. Do not dwell on rejection. If a paper is rejected by one journal, improve it as much as you can and send it to a different journal. Nearly every published philosopher I know has an “orphan” paper that took several rounds of submission before being published.

Dealing with Feedback
Sherri Irvin (University of Oklahoma)

I am struck by two facts about feedback on our scholarship:

1. Feedback is wonderful. Someone spent time and energy reading our work! They are sharing their thoughts to help us improve it!
2. Feedback is horrible. Someone is pointing out our (paper’s) shortcomings. This can be painful and disheartening. The prospect of feedback may prevent us from putting our thoughts down at all.

As someone who struggled mightily earlier in my career and still has to wait for a good day to glance at a referee’s report out of the corner of my eye, I want to share some insight and tips.

What makes feedback so horrible?

1. Them. Our colleagues can be harsh. Some readers are frustratingly careless. Some focus on their own agenda rather than ours.
2. Us. It’s hard to hear about our mistakes and imperfections. We may read harshness into the feedback. We may feel hopeless or overwhelmed.

You’re struggling with feedback. What to do?
1. Let it cool. No need to open it right away. What are the conditions that will help you open it?
2. Skim it. Get a sense of the tone and main points. Let it percolate. Your subconscious can work on it while you cook dinner.
3. Rewrite it. What’s the actionable piece? Reframe it in a way that’s helpful to you.
4. Pluck the low-hanging fruit. Struggling to go through tracked changes? Consider just accepting them. You can always adjust later. Can you address simple comments with a sentence or footnote? Knock those out.
5. Phone a friend. Do you need someone to talk through the feedback with you? To sit with you while you open it? To rewrite it with a more constructive tone? The person you ask may be relieved to know you’re struggling with this, too!

Broader perspectives:

1. Perfection is unattainable. The fact that you haven’t attained it is... normal. Embrace the shitty first draft. Don’t try to inoculate your work against every criticism.
2. The reader is just one person. You may need to satisfy them because of the role they’re in, but their preferences are not inscribed on a golden tablet.
3. You’re an expert on your topic, and you’re still learning. It’s okay if the reader spots something you miss. It’s also okay to push back if the feedback nudges your project in the wrong direction.
4. Misunderstanding is a gift. Where can you clarify and reiterate? Ideas need breathing room: unpacking, examples, repetition. Readers can help us see where what’s in our mind didn’t make it to the page.
5. You deserve care. Building communities of people who help you work through the challenges of writing and revising, and people who value you regardless of your scholarly work, is worthwhile and important.

If you’re struggling, you’re not alone. I’ve been there, and some days I’m still there. I’m rooting for you.

Four Publishing Strategies for When Writing is Difficult
Aaron Meskin (University of Georgia)

Like many others of you out there, I have issues getting writing done. For example, it was quite hard to sit down and write this short piece! And if you can’t get the writing done, you’re not going to get published. Here are four strategies I have used to deal with those issues. Note that they do not solve them. I think of them as ways I am able to accomplish things despite my hang-ups.

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1 See Anne Lamott, Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, Anchor Books, 1994, pp. 21ff.
1. Collaborating
This is my main suggestion. I’ve done a lot of it, and it’s been a successful and rewarding strategy. There’s the inherent benefit of dividing labor, and the reduced pressure that comes along with that. But there’s also social motivation to get your work done since others are depending on you. And there are other sources of motivation that I find in collaborative projects that I don’t find in individual ones. Most notably, there’s the pleasure and aesthetic value to be found in doing philosophy with others. Think here of the valuable experience that collaborators have when they find themselves capable of solving the intellectual and creative challenges they face together. Co-authorship is, moreover, a significant place in which one can learn from others and grow as a philosopher. This may be especially important for those of us who work in aesthetics, since we often find ourselves in professional contexts where we are the only ones around who are interested in issues in the area. But technology makes it easy to collaborate across significant distances.

I note that the departments that I’ve worked at have valued collaborative work. And, since collaborative authorship is standard in many other fields (especially STEM disciplines), college and university committees do not seem to have much issue with it. But make sure to check with your home institution about this, and also about my next strategy.

2. Editing
I’ve done a good bit of editing. Usually this involves some writing (e.g., an introduction), but not a lot. But editing is a form of publishing and—at least at my current institution—it counts towards tenure and promotion. Moreover, it can be an extremely rewarding activity since it is collaborative by nature, and it is a place where one can shape philosophical discussion by selecting topics, authors, and articles, and by offering editorial guidance. Also, I find it pretty low stress. You’re mostly dealing with other people’s mishegoss, not your own. If you have an idea for a special issue or symposium or book, go for it. It’s a way of getting work done—and making an impact on the field—without doing (much) writing.

It must be said that my take on this is somewhat controversial—a couple of my fellow panelists expressed significant reservations about editing. This is a reminder that what works for some with respect to publishing does not work for all.

3. Write-What-You-Will
Others will tell you that it is important to engage with existing debates to maximize your chances to get published. I’m sure this is good advice. But I am often more motivated to write if I am pursuing an unexplored (or, at least, underexplored) topic rather than trying to make a small philosophical contribution to some overworked
debate. And think of all the unexplored and underexplored topics that an aesthete can write about!

There’s the research you think you should be doing. But it’s often the case that you have another idea—something that doesn’t seem as important as the “real stuff.” Maybe it came out of teaching a class, or you thought of it over a drink. I often find it easier to write those “extra” papers, and they often turn into perfectly good work.

What does The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism look for in submissions?
Sandra Shapshay (CUNY and The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism)

Preamble: The JAAC receives approximately 275 manuscript submissions a year. The majority of submissions are original article manuscripts, but some are contributions to special issues, symposia (a curated group of 3-4 short, roughly 5,000-word papers on a common theme such as our recent food as/and heritage symposium edited by Andrea Baldini) or discussion pieces typically responding to articles published in JAAC in the past 3 years.

As editors, we are eager to publish as many high-quality, original essays in aesthetics as possible. We strive to include work from a wide variety of voices (especially new voices in the field), and articles that mine the interconnected relations within philosophy (e.g., philosophy of art/aesthetics and philosophy law, language, metaphysics, etc.) as well as those that include adjacent interdisciplinary perspectives (e.g., from art history, cognitive science, empirical psychology, literary and film studies, among others).

How can you maximize your chances of seeing your article in print or at least getting some great, constructive feedback on your work from the anonymous peer review process? Here are some tips:

1. Have something original and important to say. This could be an important contribution to an existing debate in the field or one that breaks new ground by introducing an agenda-setting topic or methodology.

2. Make sure that your manuscript seriously engages with the major Anglophone aesthetics literature germane to the topic. Even better if you have also addressed secondary literature from other language groups. It’s not a tragedy if you miss some of the important literature, but make sure you engage the key extant work. Be sure to avoid gender-biased citation habits, or other biases related to citing underrepresented groups in philosophy.

3. The abstract and opening paragraphs of your submission should clearly summarize the original and important contribution that your paper makes—that
is, make it clear to the readers why they should care about what you have to say—as well as the argumentative approach of the paper.

4. Especially for junior folks, we suggest that you try out your manuscript submission as a conference paper. That said, dissertation chapters that can stand alone as articles might not need this kind of airing, but in our experience, an excellent submission has typically benefitted from a few airings at conferences. Trying out the line of argument/approach at conferences allows you to make the paper a lot stronger on the basis of the audience’s constructive criticism.

5. If you get an R&R, as Sherri Irvin urges above, try not to react defensively. Take your time, think hard about the feedback, and revise the paper in light of the comments. The editors and, really, the vast majority of peer reviewers are being constructive: We want to help you make the paper as good as possible. In most cases, the same peer referees will review the revised submission.

And a few additional notes:

- Don’t forget to anonymize your original manuscript submission for peer review and follow standard academic publishing norms. For example, do not submit a manuscript simultaneously to more than one publisher.
- Think about submitting a symposium proposal on a cogent, timely theme relating to aesthetics (e.g., “Korean Aesthetics” edited by Hanna Kim). A successful panel at an ASA, BSA or another conference can make a great JAAC symposium.
- Consider editing (or co-editing with a colleague) a special issue on a significant topic in aesthetics, especially one that has not had enough attention in recent years (or perhaps ever!)

If you have any ideas for symposia or special issues, please feel free to reach out to Jonathan Gilmore or me. Proposals need to be approved by the JAAC Editorial Board, but we are always on the lookout for interesting proposals and are eager to work with you to develop them further.