



American Philosophical Association

**Guide for Undergraduate
Philosophy Clubs and Groups**

APA Guide for Undergraduate Philosophy Clubs and Groups



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Getting Started

Introduction

This guide is intended to serve as inspiration for those who are starting an undergraduate philosophy club or group or looking for ideas to strengthen an already existing group. The guide will offer suggestions as to how to launch, structure, and enhance such a group. There are many ideas in this guide, but what works for some will not work for others; make the choices that you think will be most successful at your institution. Be resourceful and have fun!

Constitution

If you wish to become an official campus organization (see below for various forms that the group can take), you will in most cases need to submit a constitution to the particular office for approval. Guidelines of constitution for student groups differ from school to school; please refer to your school's documentation for specifics.



Leadership and Structure of the Group

There are many possible group structures, so consider your options carefully and decide what structure is best suited to your particular situation. Many groups have a leadership hierarchy with a single president and other officers, whereas others employ a less hierarchical group governance model based on consensus-building. Some are very formal and others are very informal. In deciding what's best for you, consider questions such as the following:

What are your group's goals? Do you want to host small discussion groups or more formal events like guest lectures and conferences? Do you want to raise the profile of philosophy on your campus and draw in more students, or create camaraderie among those already interested in philosophy? Do you want to create a general philosophy group or one focused on a particular subfield? Some of these goals are more suited to a formalized structure with a traditional leadership hierarchy, while others are more suited to something less formal and more flexible.

What is your target audience? Is your group for philosophy students only or do you wish to open it to the larger community? Are you primarily seeking philosophy majors and minors or are you open to all students with interests in philosophy? When deciding on your target audience, bear in mind that philosophy students are not the only students who can think philosophically. In fact, opening your group up to students outside the philosophy department may encourage students from other disciplines to consider studying philosophy.

What relationship do you want to have with your department? Some groups are formally tied to the philosophy department, getting lots of support from the department and its faculty; others are more independent and work with the department only as needed. Find out whether your department can offer funding to support your activities, and if so, what kind of relationship with the department is required to access that funding.

Do you want to be an official campus student organization? If so, you will need to follow the guidelines provided by your school for the creation of such a group, which may more or less concisely dictate your structure.

Whatever your chosen structure may be, you will need effective leadership. No matter how informal your group, you will need some leadership structure to handle communications, event planning, and so on. Most undergraduate clubs and groups (especially those sanctioned by their institutions) are required to have—and benefit from—at least one faculty advisor. However, the mission of your club or group ought to be directed by capable and committed student leadership.

The leadership of the group should be representative of the demographics of not only the actual members but the entire target audience. It is important to make everyone feel welcome. Therefore, keep in mind diversity in its various aspects. The leadership team may not necessarily be chosen by vote of the group members, but this kind of democratic process is recommended, as it gives group members a personal investment in the group, its leaders, and its procedures.

And whatever your group structure, be sure to consider continuity—if your group's members or leaders are all about to graduate, it may not be able to continue next year. Make sure to continue bringing in new students each year and make sure your leadership includes people from multiple class years.

Funding

The source of funding is to be determined mostly by the structure of your group. Your department might have some funding available for your events, so you should talk to your faculty advisor. In addition, if you choose to register your group as an official campus organization, you may be eligible for funding from your university/college student government. It is possible that you may require further funding depending on your specific needs. If so, you should consider organizing fundraising events, or pursuing funding from

external sources—for example, by reaching out to your department’s alumni or organizations that support the sort of event for which you need the funds.

Because your group will have an academic focus, you might also seek funding from the provost. Provosts’ offices often have auxiliary/reserve funds for academic activities. The dean of students’ office might be another possible funding source.

Communication

It is important that you stay connected to your members and your department. Inform them of what is going on in your group; collaborate with the department in organizing events and recruiting new group members. You should always stay tuned to events taking place in your department and around the school; encourage participation in departmental events and any other events that are related to philosophy (e.g., public lectures by non-philosophers, which may nonetheless raise interesting philosophical issues).

Most philosophy departments have email lists for their faculty. Be sure to forward notices about your club’s events to the philosophy department chair and to the department’s administrative assistant, so the faculty will know what you have planned. Ask the faculty to publicize your club’s meetings and activities in their classes. Additional lists for philosophy majors and philosophy minors also might exist; post notices of your club’s activities in those venues as well.

Given that many students prefer texting and social media to email, you might consider creating a philosophy club group message or Facebook page—whatever will keep your club’s activities on students’ radar.

There are often students who are interested in philosophy, but have yet to take a philosophy course or have decided to major in something else. Find ways to publicize your club’s activities beyond the confines of the philosophy department: an all-student email list, a poster in the student union, or emails to the other humanities department chairs.

Finally, don’t forget the old-school power of a physical poster. Hanging a poster by a water fountain, vending machine, or on a departmental bulletin board is especially effective.

Ask the department chair if the department might be willing to add a philosophy club bulletin board to the department’s hallway or office, and then keep that bulletin board updated with pictures of club’s leaders, pictures of the majors, and news from the post-graduate activities of recent alums.

Group Meetings and Events



Meetings

Once you have a clear idea of the club's structure and objectives, decisions need to be made as to meeting times and styles. It is useful to gather information on the availability and preferences of the targeted members. Depending on how formal the group is, the meeting may be a regular monthly occurrence, or an impromptu get-together for informal conversations. Thinking about the events that your group wants to host will help you determine how, when, and where to meet.

Keep in mind that it may be hard to meet at times when students are particularly busy, such as the last two or three weeks of the semester; avoid scheduling meetings and events during these times (except, perhaps, for events aimed at relieving the stress of exams!).

After you establish your meeting schedule and system, we recommend establishing some kind of online forum, such as a Facebook page or even a simple email distribution list, to remind members of meetings. This can also serve as a great place for sharing articles or papers and hosting philosophical discussion outside your group's regular meetings and events.

Events

The events that the group will host will depend on the interests of the members and the target audience. For example, events that are heavily philosophical are more attractive to philosophy students and scholars, whereas a movie night featuring films of philosophical interest is likelier to bring in a non-philosophy audience as well. It is best to draw on the particular interests of the members while keeping in mind who you ideally want to be present at your events. Below are some events to consider.



Philosophy Coffee

In our experience, this is the central kind of event sponsored by philosophy clubs. Students select a philosophical topic to discuss, invite the faculty, and hold an informal (i.e., no homework reading) discussion of the topic for 90 minutes or so at a casual gathering over coffee, tea, dinner, ice cream—whatever your members prefer! This would be an occasion for the members to get to know each other and each other’s philosophical interests without any pressure for structure. Just be sure to provide plenty of coffee and snacks (or whatever refreshments you’ve decided on)!

You can set a general philosophical discussion topic or leave it entirely open. One way of picking a topic is to have members, at the end of a previous coffee, write down topics on a piece of paper, have the club president read them aloud, and then ask for a show of hands. The topic with the most votes becomes the topic for the next coffee.

Simple events like these can strengthen the relationships among student and faculty participants, and the club in general. And free food is always a great way to attract attendees!

Meet-and-Greet

At the start of a new semester or year, host a welcome event for new philosophy majors and minors. At the end of a semester or year, host a farewell picnic. Give other students lots of low-pressure opportunities to meet you and find out what your group is all about.



Book Reading and Discussion

This is a great way to appeal to everyone's interests and thereby bring the whole group together. Each semester or calendar year, the whole group could choose a book or set of articles to be read over a specific period. The group can then regularly meet and discuss them, or perhaps host an online discussion. Consider inviting a professor from your department or other relevant departments to discuss with you. It might also contribute to greater participation if some of the chosen works have bearing on the scholarship in other departments at your school as well, so as to spark interest beyond the philosophy department. For example, if you choose works in political philosophy, consider doing targeted outreach to students in the political science department, or even invite the political science club to partner with you on the entire series of discussions.

Student Paper Presentations

If your club is student-focused, consider having some students present their papers or projects to the group, to be followed by a discussion for useful feedback to the student researchers. At least some of the students in the club will have some professional interest in philosophy, and so it is important that the club have space for (semi-)professional presentations. This could be especially useful to students preparing for presentations at conferences, capstone projects, or publication in journals.

Poster Sessions

Provide space for students to present their papers in poster form in a public setting at the end of a semester or year. To encourage participation, send invitations to students and ask for faculty recommendations. Presenting a poster is a very useful way to communicate sometimes complex ideas in their simplest forms. This kind of event can both support students' scholarship and allow for their work to be shared with the larger community. But make sure to instruct presenters to prepare posters that are visually engaging—a poster that is overly text-heavy won't be as successful.

Philosophy Trivia Night

This kind of activity offers an opportunity for interaction and informal approaches to learning. It could (1) help strengthen the club by having the members work in groups and (2) be a fun way to learn some philosophical facts and history without having to sit in on a lecture. Make the trivia night accessible and enticing to students across many majors by creating as varied a list of questions as possible. Possible categories include current events of philosophical interest, trivia about movies and TV shows with philosophical themes, and facts about your philosophy department and/or school.

For this and other more informal events, consider using a local coffee shop, restaurant, or the student center (rather than a classroom or lecture hall) as your venue.



Philosophy Film Series

Host a film series featuring philosophy talks or discussions paired with movie screenings. It needn't be formal; depending on the members' preferences, it could be just a hangout event for the club members to come together in a relaxed atmosphere, or it could be a major event series promoted across campus. Compile suggestions of thought-provoking, philosophical films well in advance and decide which to screen and when to screen them. If your group would like a single speaker to direct the discussion, check the availability of the prospective speakers for each film so you can plan appropriately. The speaker need not be a professional scholar—it could be a student with an interest in some philosophical aspects of the film.

Some films you might consider include the following:

- Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure (1989)
- Bladerunner (1982)
- Cider House Rules (1999)
- Dead Poets Society (1989)
- The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (2007)
- Ex Machina (2015)
- Fight Club (1999)
- Gattaca (1997)
- Groundhog Day (1993)
- Her (2013)
- Inception (2010)
- It's a Wonderful Life (1946)

- The Matrix (1999)
- Memento (2000)
- Million Dollar Baby (2004)
- Minority Report (2002)
- The Prestige (2006)
- Safety Not Guaranteed (2012)
- Talk to Her (2002)
- The Truman Show (1998)

These are just a start! Do a web search for “philosophy films” for more ideas.

Note: Be sure to follow all relevant copyright laws, including paying for appropriate permissions. Many student groups do not realize that they need to secure copyright permissions to show movies on university campuses and that they can be prosecuted if they do not. Check with your institution's library staff to locate more information about copyright laws that may apply. If securing permissions will be too expensive for your group alone, reach out to the campus film society or your school's film studies department for co-sponsorship.

Group Trips

It can be enriching to visit other philosophy clubs in your area. You could have a joint event with multiple clubs, or just send one or two students from your group to represent you at an event on another campus. If you develop relationships with other clubs, consider inviting student speakers from outside your school to present papers at your club.

If your school or a nearby school is hosting a philosophy conference, you should encourage your group members to participate. You may even be able to help organize or co-host the conference. Ask your department if there is funding available to offset some costs of your members attending regional philosophy conferences at colleges or universities.

Your group might also consider traveling to less obviously philosophical destinations. Many generally interesting trips present ample opportunity for identifying and applying philosophical themes—and many offer student discounts or discounts for groups. Visit a nature reserve and have a discussion about environmental ethics; visit an art museum and have a discussion about aesthetics; go to a stage play and have a discussion about the philosophical themes in the play. If possible, find a professor to join you to help with your discussion, or ask the venue whether someone there might be willing to join you for a discussion.

Undergraduate Conference

Your school may not have an existing annual philosophy undergraduate conference. This may be your chance to initiate one if you see a need for it, and have enough interest and the administrative skills to sustain it. Such conferences provide a tremendous opportunity for students to present, discuss, publish their work, and get feedback for further improvement. This is a huge task to undertake and should be considered in consultation with your department and/or other nearby departments. The stronger your club is, the more likely it is that you are going to pull this off and sustain it over the years. It is thus advised to consider the standing of your club before undertaking the task. A lot needs to be determined regarding the logistics of advertisement, funding, review and selection of submissions, etc.

If your group cannot coordinate its own conference, you might consider connecting with another existing conference. For example, if your university hosts a general undergraduate conference, you could invite students presenting on philosophical topics during that conference to present to your club separately. This

would give the club members a smaller audience and a venue more conducive to discussing their particular questions about the topic.

APA Conferences

The APA has three conferences (called meetings) each year, one for each of our divisions: Eastern, Central, and Pacific. Each meeting lasts about four days. The meetings include a variety of sessions on philosophical topics—panel sessions where several philosophers give papers on related subjects, sessions dedicated to a particular book by a single scholar, sessions organized by smaller philosophical societies and APA committees on topics of their particular interest, an address by the president of the division, an autobiographical lecture by a senior scholar, and more. These are great opportunities for undergraduates, especially those from schools nearby, to see philosophy in action, to network with professors and graduate students in philosophy, and to get a sense of what it is like to be a professional philosopher.

APA meetings are in different cities each year, so if there isn't one close to your school, make it a road trip with your group!

Undergraduate student groups wishing to attend one day of an APA meeting can attend for free or for a nominal fee (normally \$5 per student), depending on the meeting, if arrangements are made in advance. To sign up for this, contact meetings@apaonline.org at least two weeks before the meeting begins.

Individual undergraduates, and undergraduate groups wishing to attend more than one day of conference activities, can register for APA meetings at the student member rate, even if they are not APA members. If you are a member, just go to the APA website, sign in, and register—your discount will be applied automatically. If you are not an APA member but would like to register at the student rate, contact meetings@apaonline.org.



Group Projects

There's more to a club than hosting events. Consider what other kinds of ongoing projects you might want to take on.

Information on Philosophy News and Opportunities

Keep the club informed on what is going on in philosophy at large. You might designate a person or two to follow philosophy news and blogs and share interesting links with the rest of the club. Also, make sure to keep all informed about conferences and journals, deadlines for paper submissions, application deadlines for summer philosophy programs, and other relevant information.

Collaboration with Philosophy Department

Your philosophy club doesn't have to be only for students already interested in philosophy—you can be an ambassador group to increase interest in philosophy and bring in new students to the department. Find out whether club members can be part of your department's Student Advisory Board, if one exists, so as to be aware of and contribute to the department's choices of events. Involving your club advisor(s) in your events often will also contribute to the connection between department and club.

Collaboration with Other Groups

Find out about other on-campus or community groups that have overlapping interests and partner with them on events. For example, a discussion on the philosophy of art may very well interest students involved in clubs or departments focusing on art, music, theatre, literature, and architecture.

Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl

Every year, the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE) holds the Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl, an academic competition in practical and professional ethics. Teams respond to and tackle particular cases developed by APPE faculty and professionals. Regional competitions lead to national competitions. Consider partnering with your school's IEB team or starting a new one, if none exists. The IEB is a chance for students to exercise their skills in response to various issues in today's society. For more information, visit the [APPE website](#).

Community Outreach

Your group might also consider doing outreach to the community, such as introducing high school or elementary school students to philosophy in collaboration with local schools. This is a great event idea and a fulfilling one if well accomplished. If interested in the opportunity, contact your school's office for community service (or any office of that sort) to find out if there are existing projects or relationships with local schools you can build on. If not, the office should still be able to assist you in contacting local schools. For resources on philosophy for children (P4C), please visit the [P4C Cooperative](#).

An easy way to reach out to the community is to arrange to hold one of the club's "philosophy coffees" at a local high school or middle school. Most high schools and middle schools do not teach philosophy courses, so in order to recruit interested students, contact the school's forensics club, debate coach, Model United Nations advisor, and English department.

You might also work with local organizations, such as an arts council, a senior center, an independent movie theater, or other community groups, on outreach projects to bring philosophy to the public.

Undergraduate Journal

An undergraduate-only journal provides students with fantastic opportunities not only to have their own work published but also to learn the ins and outs of academic publishing and all that goes into it. Starting a journal is a huge undertaking, so if it's something your group wants to pursue, work closely with your faculty advisor and other philosophy faculty members to explore the idea. You might also reach out to existing undergraduate journals to learn how they operate. The following are a few such journals:

- [*Aporia*](#)
- [*The Dialectic*](#)
- [*Ephemeris*](#)
- [*Episteme*](#)
- [*GEIST*](#)
- [*Midwest Journal of Undergraduate Research*](#)
- [*Princeton Journal of Bioethics*](#)
- [*Stance*](#)

However, a journal is such a large undertaking that it could compete with your group for students' (and faculty members') energy and resources. So consider alternatives, such as organizing a conference or publishing a philosophy blog.



Fun and Visibility

One of the uses or goals of a philosophy club is to facilitate philosophy's coming to life outside the classroom. This may be reflected not only in the topics discussed or the atmosphere of the meetings, but also in terms of who takes part in the discussions. Therefore, visibility is crucial. Below are some suggestions to increase your group's visibility:

Philosophy swag: Come up with a logo and/or witty slogan for your group, and then use those to make up some fun items your members and event attendees can show off around campus: t-shirts, tote-bags, mugs, bracelets, hoodies, etc. You can order in bulk from a local or online print shop or set up an order-on-demand store at a site like Zazzle.

Keeping up with current news and events: Another way to connect with your audience and bring more people to your events is to tailor them to what is happening around you, be it in popular media or in the daily life on your campus. It may also help to join existing celebrations and give them a philosophical twist. For example, at Halloween, you could host a discussion of death and dying, or the philosophy of dress, or cultural appropriation. If your campus is seeing demonstrations on race relations, consider joining with other relevant campus groups, such as Black Lives Matter, to host a speaker on philosophy of race. Plan activities in sync with various events on campus so as to encourage inclusivity and engagement.

Mentorship programs: With the proper faculty oversight, pairing upper-class philosophy student mentors and under-class philosophy student mentees may allow for stronger relationships among students and greater interest in philosophy. It may also encourage group leadership that is shared across different class years, and this could ensure the strength of the club every year.

APA student membership: Members of the philosophy group are encouraged to [become members of the American Philosophical Association \(APA\)](#). Annual dues for undergraduate students are just \$25, and being a member gets you access to the *Journal of the APA* and other publications, discounts on books and services, eligibility to serve on APA committees and submit to the APA blog and conferences, and more. You'll also receive regular updates on what's going on at the APA throughout the year. Becoming members of the APA will also allow your group to remain connected to and informed about the larger philosophical world.

Let the APA know about your group: The APA is creating a directory of active undergraduate philosophy groups. To submit your group to the directory or update your group information, complete our [Undergraduate Philosophy Club Directory Sign-Up Form](#).

Additional Resources



Resources for Undergraduates

http://www.apaonline.org/undergrad_resources

Minorities and Philosophy (MAP)

<http://www.mapforthe-gap.com/>

Guidelines for respectful, constructive, and inclusive philosophical discussion

<http://consc.net/norms.html>

Acknowledgements

This guide was developed by APA undergraduate intern Kévin Orly Irakóze, with assistance from interns Alexander Lester, Taylor Mazza, and Daniel Apadula. It was reviewed and edited by APA executive director Amy Ferrer, with assistance from the Committee on the Teaching of Philosophy and publications coordinator Erin Shepherd.