

How to give an Undergraduate Talk (at the EMU UCiP)

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So, you have been invited to give a talk at our Undergraduate Conference in Philosophy. In all likelihood, you have given some presentations before. A formal talk is not unlike the informal ones you have given in class; the main differences will be the setting is a bit grander, you will receive formal comments, and that questions from the audience will be less structured. In what follows, I offer some suggestions on how to prepare and deliver a formal talk (noting that these suggestions are tailored to our conference in particular).

Basics

Congratulations on the strength of your paper! Your creative work has been selected from a fairly large pool of other papers on the basis of its contribution to philosophy as a living endeavor. Giving papers is an important part of our discipline, and you have taken your first important step into the big game.

Your job as a presenter is to convey the central ideas and argument(s) of your paper to the audience. Your first step in preparing your talk is to consider the fact that the audience at our conference, while trained in philosophy, has no expertise in the area of your work; unlike a presentation for one of your classes, your audience at the conference is not likely to have read the works you're drawing from, or even have attended basic lectures on the topic at hand. As a result, you will have to spend a bit more time on the basics, and a little less time on your more fine-grained points. You will likely have to cut most "asides" that appear in your paper from your talk; these are the sorts of things that may well come up during the Q&A.

You can think of your role as one of teacher, as well as philosopher. What are the basic ideas your audience will need in order to follow your argument(s)? Is there any terminology you use that may be regional or idiosyncratic? Can you make the central argument of your paper in 4 to 5 steps? These organizing questions will help you make decisions about what to cut or add for the purpose of presenting your paper.

Details

First, take your talk seriously. A talk is not the same as a paper, and your submitted paper may need some tweaks to be a good talk. Your paper will soon be part of the enterprise of philosophy, and that is no small thing. While your audience will exercise the principle of charity, as all good philosophers do, it is up to you to give them some ideas and an argument they can readily share with you – this will generate the best discussion and be the most rewarding for you own thoughts on the matter.

Second, you should practice the talk before you present. Here are two things that happen to almost all speakers: (1) unless they have presented many times before, speakers over or underestimate how long it will take them to get through their talk, and (2) while all speakers are nervous, a quick run through with friendly faces (even if it is just your own in the mirror) will help get the lead out of your speaking voice.

Third, it is a simple fact that a speaker always feel more nervous than they appear. These nerves are present in even the greatest public speakers; it's what you do with the feeling that is some importance.

You should not focus on this feeling; you look fine to everyone else, believe me. Further, everyone knows that it is perfectly acceptable for a speaker to be nervous; they don't care that you are, and neither should you. If you can focus on your very interesting ideas during your talk, rather than your feeling of nervousness, you will be better situated to digress where necessary and rally when needed. Just do your best to try and ignore your feeling of nervousness – it is ***completely normal***, and the audience is totally cool with it.

Fourth, you will receive formal comments on your paper. This is an odd experience the first time (and almost any time). Your commenter will be assigned well before your presentation time, and, in most cases, they should provide you with a written copy of their comments before your presentation time. There are a few things to say about this: (1) you are not getting the comments so that you can fix your paper prior to the talk – this is a huge no-no! You are getting the comments so that you may prepare a quick response. When the conference is well and done, you should use the comments to improve your paper, but your talk should be faithful to the paper you submitted. (2) The commenter will present his/her comments after you have completed your initial talk. During this time, you should sit in the speaker area. It is common for speakers (you) to take notes during the commenter's presentation. (3) When the commenter is done, you will have (roughly) 5 minutes to respond prior to the general Q&A – you do not need to respond to everything the commenter said. Commonly, speakers highlight one or two points from the commenter for additional clarification or response. Your job is not to rebut everything the commenter said; your job is to indicate a direction for the conversation to follow. As a result, you might frame your response to the commenter as follows: "Thank you for all the thoughts, and the nice summary of my work. I would like to respond to (or clarify my position on) ____." From here, you will respond or clarify, as specified. Since you only have 5 minutes, you will have no choice but to be selective in your response, as I noted above.

Critical Points

You will have 20 minutes to present your talk. After this, you will receive your formal commentary; this usually takes about 5 minutes. You will also have 5 minutes to respond to the comments.

- It takes about 2 minutes to read a single, double spaced, page (in regular font with regular margins). This means that you will only have time to present somewhere between 8 and 11 double spaced pages.
- Your number one goal is to provide the basic ideas and argument(s) of your paper. You will know you have achieved this goal, if the audience is able to quickly ask questions that address your main ideas. I strongly suggest that before you prepare the talk version of your paper, you simply write down what you take to be the key concepts and an outline of what you take to be your master argument. These two simple "lists" will help you organize your talk.
- Your second goal is to receive as much useful feedback as possible. This is a goal that even the most experience presenters sometimes overlook. While it is nice to look good, to impress the crowd with your intellect, and/or devastate opposed positions, it is far more important to generate a talk that will garner you interesting feedback on your argument, future research, or ways to improve your current paper.

Other Thoughts

Be gracious. Philosophy's dialectical method has, traditionally, been understood in a more or less combative way. This is ridiculous; the goal is truth, not victory. You can learn from your peers, as much as they can learn from you. Take all questions and comments (even the oddly critical sounding ones) in stride and respond with a level of humility (even to questions that may seem out of left field), and you will get the most out of discussion.

Have fun! This conference is designed to be a place of collegiality and a nice first step into a community of thinkers that may help you for the rest of your academic life. Attend as many talks as you can, follow up after your own talk with people who interacted with your ideas, and enjoy the spirit of camaraderie that most professional conference aim to offer.

Reach out to your own faculty mentors. The people who taught you want to see you succeed. If you are interested in getting help tailoring your talk, or thinking more about your paper, the very people who helped you the first time are likely to be interested in helping now.

Final Thoughts

We are excited to meet you and hear your paper! This conference exists only because of you, the speakers, but, not so secretly, it is designed for all students of philosophy. Your audience is truly waiting to hear what you have to say! Enjoy.