

How to write a research paper in philosophy

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Know these things in advance:

1. This is a time-intensive activity, but about as valuable as anything you'll do in this class. You are going to learn how to bring something to the philosophical conversation. By learning what conversations are going on in the larger field, you will be better positioned to say something informed and interesting about the contents of this class. You might even produce new knowledge.
2. Although a lot of Anglophone philosophy in the 20th century has been article-focused, lots of the best and most important stuff is in books, or collected in books that aren't widely available or the availability of which remains behind a paywall. That means you may need to use some non-electronic resources at various points. If you only do your research with Google or other online tools, you will very likely miss things You Ought to Know.
3. In undergrad philosophy, newer does not always mean better. Getting a grip on foundational statements of some issue is usually a better strategy at this stage than trying to figure out the state of the latest debate about some epicycle of the original argument.
4. Assume that some of what you track down won't be relevant to what you are looking for. You are going to get a bunch of stuff, sift through it, and then maybe repeat the process until you have what you need.
5. It is oftentimes hard to know what is more and less important, but if you see some names cited a lot in connection to some topic, it is safe to assume that person is doing influential work.

The nitty-gritty

1. The single most important thing you can do is **follow the footnote trail**
2. Read a couple of general overviews of the topic (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online), the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (**not** online)). Wikipedia tends to be wildly unreliable in philosophy, and if I see an earnest citation to wikipedia in connection with philosophy, I will automatically fail you on that assignment. Note: overview-ish resources like dictionaries and encyclopedias don't count as research sources for our purposes, but they can help orient you to the larger issues at play and give you some sense of what is regarded as important.
3. Do searches in databases like *Philosopher's Index* (available via Gleeson's electronic resources), and in places like *Phil Papers* (online) for the keywords or issues that you are mainly interested in. There are specialized research tools that depend on whether your field intersects with other stuff (SSRN for law; PsychInfo for psychology) so don't be afraid to use that stuff.
4. Download and read articles; photocopy stuff in stacks that looks promising but isn't available online. If you are having trouble getting what you need, ask librarians for help. Your tuition dollars pay for them to help you do research. Plus, they absolutely love it when a student actually speaks

to them. Also, they are frequently useful. USF's library has gotten better over the years, but we sometimes don't have subscriptions to pretty important journals, and these folks can either help you get what you are looking for, or suggest to you a feasible alternative.

5. If you are going to cite something, you better have read it and understood it well enough to know that your citation is a legit citation. (Think about what this means for a moment. We're talking a lot of reading time here. Philosophy is hard, and you will need to read your cited pieces several times to be sure that you understand it, or that some passage you are citing isn't a case where the philosopher is considering some argument he or she rejects. This is very time consuming. But it makes you a better philosopher and scholar.)
6. Cite all of your stuff properly.