Philosophical research begins with the initial thoughts you have after having read a philosophical text. Having read Plato or Descartes or Sellars (or what have you), you may have found some ideas and arguments more interesting than others and even have some critical impressions regarding claims that seem right and others that seem wrong. Now is the time to sharpen and develop those initial thoughts by . . . reading some more philosophy! Take your interests and go to the literature to see what other philosophers have said that might be of some relevance. By reading the literature relevant to your interests, you can begin to see the sorts of questions which have been raised concerning what you’re interested in and the sorts of debates which have occurred to attempt to answer those questions. And, in that way, you can learn from the literature about how to think about your interests in a more philosophically sophisticated way. And the stress here is on the word “learn.” Writing a paper about your initial thoughts on something we have read without learning from the literature about how you can think about those issues more analytically, with more subtlety, nuance, and attention to important details that might otherwise be missed, will almost certainly result in paper that is not sufficiently analytical and lacks the subtlety, nuance and attention to detail that are the marks of a good research paper. Though philosophical research is, in one way, a very private activity consisting of solitary acts of reading, thinking, and writing, it is, in another more important way, an inherently social activity. The point of philosophical research is to think in dialogue with the rest of the philosophical community concerning your interests, to join the philosophical conversations that are ongoing concerning them as they are recounted in the literature. And you can only join those conversations by learning about them in the literature.

*Philosopher’s Index.* The place to begin looking for literature is *Philosopher’s Index.* It is available online from the library’s web page. Begin at the college’s home page ([www.bsc.edu](http://www.bsc.edu)) and click on “MyBSC” near the top of the page, then “Library” in the drop down menu. At the Library web page, click on “Databases” near the top of the page. Then you’ll see an option for “All Databases.” Click on “Databases by Title” under that. You’ll be taken to a web page with all of the databases BSC has access to in alphabetical order. Either click on “P” near the top of that page or scroll down until you reach “P” and click on “The Philosopher’s Index,” third from the top under “P.” You will then find a fairly standard search engine where you can enter various combinations of key words to search “anywhere,” or just in the “title,” “author” and so on. Be sure to specify whether you want to search for one keyword and another or one key word or another. When you click “search” you will be taken to a list of various articles and/or books. If something looks interesting you can click on the title and you will be taken to a page where, in most cases, you will find an abstract (a short summary) of the article or book. If it is an article you will sometimes find a link to “PDF Full Text” on the left side of the page which you can click to get immediate electronic access to the article. If you don’t see that, try clicking on the link to “Articles at BSC” on the left, to see if the library has access to an electronic version of the article. If it doesn’t, then you’ll need to order the article through Interlibrary Loan (see next paragraph for more). If you’re interested in a book, you should first check to see if the library has a copy of it. You can search for it on the library’s home page. If it doesn’t, you will need to use
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*Act Sooner than Later!* There is a decent chance that you will need to use Interlibrary Loan to find literature to work with in your research. Since getting an article or, especially, a book using Interlibrary Loan takes some time, you should start looking for literature sooner than later. (By the way: I do not accept a delay with getting literature through Interlibrary Loan as a reason for granting an extension on the due date for your research paper.) It is a simple matter to take a key word or two and search *Philosopher’s Index* and fill out a few request forms for any literature you think you might be able to use. By acting sooner than later, you will ensure that you have an ample amount of literature to begin to work with as the due date for this assignment approaches.

*Your Initial Work with the Literature.* Hopefully, you will find several articles or books that look like they may help you to develop some of your initial thoughts and interests with what we have been reading in class. As I will stress in the “Sample Paper Proposal,” you will only need to work in a substantive way with a very small subset of this literature in your paper (probably, only a single article or chapter from a book!). But you will almost certainly need to look through more literature than you will finally wind up using because much of it, though initially promising, will not prove to be very useful. Literature that you will find useful in helping you to write your paper will have three distinctive characteristics. And it may take a while to find something that has all three of these:

1) It helps you to develop your own initial thoughts in a *critical* direction. By “critical” I do not necessarily mean that it helps you to see why you should disagree with some claim being advanced in our readings. But the literature should help you to think in a more informed way about both the *strengths* and *weaknesses* of the arguments and ideas you have decided to write about. The most basic thing we try to do with philosophical research is to search for reasons for thinking a claim advanced by some philosopher is either true or false. Good literature will help you to do that in a balanced way by learning about the perceived strengths and weaknesses of a position.

2) It goes beyond in a substantive way what we have done with these ideas in class. We
will begin discussing possible strengths and weaknesses of the views being advanced in our readings in class. Your paper should not merely be a rehash of what we have discussed there. The point of this assignment is to develop and extend our critical consideration of these ideas, to bring new critical perspectives to the table, so to speak.

3) You can understand it. This last characteristic of good literature is especially important. You will be looking through literature which was written by professional philosophers for other professional philosophers. As such, you may find an article or chapter from a book which looks promising with regard to the first two characteristics of good literature, but which you have a very hard time understanding. It will not help you to write a good research paper to work with literature you do not understand well. You should not give up on a piece of literature merely because you find it difficult to understand on your first reading. Just about any literature in philosophy is difficult to understand on a first reading. Most often, you will need to read and re-read something before the arguments and ideas start to click for you. But you should be prepared to go through a number of articles before you find one that you feel confident you understand well enough to write about.

The hardest part of this assignment is, almost certainly, this first part where you are looking through literature to find something that has these three characteristics, literature that you can use to help write a good research paper. I can not stress this enough. This is another reason to act sooner than later. The earlier you have some literature to start looking through the earlier you will find something that seems promising to work with. Leaving all of this initial work with the literature to the last minute is almost a sure recipe for disaster. And this part of the assignment needs to be done before the due date of the paper proposal since writing a good paper proposal requires that you have identified some promising literature and can explain to me how you think you will use it. More about that on the “Sample Paper Proposal.”