

GUIDELINES FOR THE PROSPECTUS

The aim of the prospectus is to provide a clear and well-organized presentation of your dissertation project. The prospectus should be written in such a way as to be comprehensible to specialists in your own field as well as to scholars from other disciplines. Not only will the prospectus stand as the first formal iteration of your intended research for your advisor and doctoral committee members. It will also serve as the basis for applications for internal and external dissertation grants and fellowships. This is why clarity and succinctness are of the essence. A good way to think about the prospectus is to see it as an introduction, and many find it useful to read a variety of introductions to academic monographs. While you will quickly discern that there is no single formula—some introductions begin with a citation or a historical event, others with a review of the relevant literature, yet others with a rhetorical question—a strong introduction will bring together a thesis statement, an argument for the importance of the subject in question, an overview of what has been done, and an explanation of the chosen methodological approach.

The prospectus should incorporate these elements in a document approximately six to eight single-spaced pages (in 12-point font), that is, approximately 2500 to 3000 words. This is exclusive of footnotes (which are optional) and a selected bibliography of primary and secondary sources (which should range from an additional two to four pages). Your prospectus should be organized to address each of the sections listed below. It is recommended that you follow the order in which these are indicated, although shifts in this order may occur depending on what best suits the nature of the thesis. The word lengths for each section are meant as suggestions.

The prospectus should be devised over the course of the semester following the successful passing of the general exams. Ideally, it should be presented to the advisor and committee members no later than the end of the second semester of the third term in residence. The doctoral committee is normally comprised of the advisor, a first reader from the GSD, and a second reader preferably from an outside discipline germane to the proposed research.

I. Project Title

II. Thesis Statement (up to 250 words)

The thesis statement is arguably the most important part of the prospectus, as it is the first (and sometime only!) thing that those who are not acquainted with your project will read. The thesis statement is akin to a brief abstract. In one to three paragraphs, it should present as concisely and coherently as possible the historical and/or theoretical problem you are treating, characterize its significance, and provide a statement about what your expected findings and conclusions are likely to be. Clarity and succinctness are crucial here; if you aren't able to state your thesis clearly, then it all likelihood you are still apprehensive and somewhat confused about what you are after.

III. Chapter Outline (up to 500 words)

Summarize the structure of the dissertation by providing prospective titles for each chapter or part as well as brief descriptive paragraphs fleshing out their content. It is understood that this is a preliminary picture of the whole, and that the structure and content of chapters will shift depending on where your research and thinking ultimately lead you. Some find it easier to insert this section at a later juncture in the prospectus, that is, after the historiographic and methodological parameters have been discussed.

IV. Historiographic Overview (500 to 750 word)

This section is both explanatory and justificatory, in the sense that it expands on the thesis abstract by placing the problem(s) addressed by the dissertation in its broader historical and disciplinary contexts. Here, you should review and offer a critical assessment of the major secondary sources that pertain to your chosen problem. Remember that secondary sources are interpretive accounts appearing after the fact. They offer a commentary on and an evaluation of a given set of works, events or discoveries. They are retrospective in nature, and so are written with the benefit of historical distance and contextual remove.

Your aim here is to underscore links with and breaks from the work of other scholars, and not simply to summarize a list of references. In other words, how does your project intersect with what has already been done? What major examples have influenced your thinking? How do you see your own work as building upon and/or differentiating itself from previous scholarship? As you tackle these questions, keep in mind that you want to demonstrate familiarity with the studies that have contributed to the subject at hand and, by the same token, to show how you are making an original contribution to the field rather than simply replicating what has already been accomplished.

V. Methodological Approach (500 to 750 words)

Describe how you plan to approach the subject under scrutiny. This will involve such basic aspects as whether you are envisioning a series of case studies or are deploying a comparative method. You should also identify the theoretical and/or historical perspectives with which you need to engage as well as the kinds of scholarship that offer approaches to a problem similar to the one(s) with which you are grappling. It is helpful to signpost works that you take to be models for what you want to achieve, and to identify what it is, exactly, that you find methodologically compelling and productive in these examples. It may very well be the case that such works will stem from disciplines completely outside your own immediate frame of reference (e.g. anthropology, literature, philosophy, sociology, history of science etc.).

VI. Primary Source Material (up to 500 words)

No matter how brilliant the thesis statement, overview and methodology might seem to your readers, these will mean nothing without the evidence to support your arguments. Primary sources are original materials, including works of art and architecture, sites, artifacts, treatises, diaries, correspondence, chronicles, novels, scientific experiments, official records, government documents and archives of unpublished papers. Primary sources typically date from the time

period with which you are dealing. They present the first physical, oral or textual manifestation of original thinking, and they serve as the objects of—the evidence for—your study.

Needless to say, it is not expected that, at this beginning stage, you will have consulted *in toto* the pertinent works and archives, and therefore this section of the prospectus is perforce preliminary and incomplete; your research, when you actually undertake it, will lead you in directions you can't possibly predict. This said, a solid presentation of primary sources sits at the heart of a strong prospectus. This is the section in which you demonstrate not only that sources for your research exist but that you have some sense of what they may or may not reveal. Indicate where these sources are located, what they contain, what you think you can draw from them and how you think they will contribute to the broader arguments you will be making.

VII. Schedule for Research and Writing (up to 250 words)

Propose a schedule that outlines how you envision the unfolding of the research and writing stages. Keep in mind that this timetable is necessarily provisional, and assume that you have two to three years ahead of you to complete the project. It is helpful to think in terms of semesters (spring, summer and fall), and to divide the calendar year accordingly. This will help you to outline your plans with a reasonable amount of time factored in for preliminary research, for travel to archives, libraries, sites and collections, and for the writing and revision of the dissertation itself. Your schedule should also generally reflect and cohere with the content of the chapters you proposed.

VIII. Selected Bibliography (two to four additional pages)

Append to your prospectus a bibliography of primary and secondary sources, which you have selected because they are crucial to the subject of the thesis as you have conceived of it. This bibliography need not be annotated, and so should amount at most to two to four pages (exclusive of the page limit of the prospectus). This list of items is not meant to be comprehensive but, rather, illustrative of the dissertation content. Divide the list into two sections so as to separate primary references from secondary references. In each section, references should be organized alphabetically by author according to a standard bibliographic format (you can consult the *Chicago Manual of Style* or the *MLA Handbook*). Subsections are optional, but if you feel this is a good means of clarifying certain aspects of your thesis, you can subdivide by type or by topic, making sure to alphabetize within each subsection.