

Writing a Humanities Dissertation Prospectus

Getting Started

A prospectus should be viewed as a preliminary statement of what you propose to do in your dissertation, and not as an unalterable commitment. While the shelf life of a prospectus is often not very long, its value lies in helping you and your committee get an initial handle on your project.

Although your prospectus may change both in its finer and larger details, another primary purpose of writing one is to demonstrate to your committee your ability to write a sound and reasonable project proposal. The prospectus should provide provisional answers to the following two questions: is this a feasible project? And why should anyone care about it?

Presumably, by this point you have identified, and discussed with your advisor(s), a general research problem that you hope will be the focus of your dissertation. It is often easiest to get from that problem to a finished prospectus by thinking in terms of the different elements comprising the document.

Elements of a Prospectus

The appropriate form and typical content of a prospectus inevitably vary from field to field. In most cases, however, a prospectus should contain the following information.

1 Introduction	A statement of the topic of the dissertation and an explanation of its importance. What in general might one expect to learn from the dissertation that is not now known, understood, or appreciated? Are there two fields which can be bridged? Is there a new perspective or technique which can be applied to an old field? Your introduction, in short, provides background; explains the problem you are trying to solve; and highlights its significance.
2 Literature Review	A concise review of what has been done on the topic in the past. Specifically, how will the proposed dissertation differ from, or expand upon, previous work? The literature review section will show how you are participating in existing scholarly debates; show that you know the relevant literature; and show how your work will contribute something new and advance the field.
3 Methodology	Your methodology should indicate how you will conduct and structure your project. Will you be working primarily with primary sources in the Yale library, or another library or archive? Will you be doing field work at specific sites in the United States or abroad? What are potential challenges you might encounter via your methodology, and how do you plan to overcome them?
4 Chapter Outline	A tentative proposal for the internal organization of the dissertation should state the material that each chapter will cover, and convey how each chapter fits into the larger project. Why are the chapters ordered the way they are? Are they more or less discrete, or are they tracing an overarching narrative trajectory?

<p>5 Timeline (Optional)</p>	<p>A provisional timetable for completion of the dissertation might include research and chapter-writing goals for each semester, when and for how long you plan to visit archives or do fieldwork, as well as grants or fellowships that you plan to apply for (when are their deadlines?) and what periods of your research they will cover.</p>
<p>6 Bibliography</p>	<p>This can be simply a list of sources, or you can annotate the list. There are also a number of ways in which you can organize the sources: for example, you can separate them into primary and secondary sections, or divide the sources up by chapter.</p>

Although it is difficult to prescribe a standard length for the prospectus, it should be long enough to include essential information for all proposed topics, but concise enough to focus clearly on the subject. About twenty-five pages, excluding bibliography, should be sufficient in most cases. Check your program or department guidelines to be sure.

Drafting the Prospectus

Most students give themselves a semester to write their prospectus. If they have taken their oral exams in the fall of their third year, for instance, they aim to have the prospectus completed by the end of the spring semester. Many students deviate from this timeline, though, finding one that works for them and their committee.

Some prospectus sections are easier to write because they are more straightforward. Others not so much; they require a lot of reading. It might be easiest to begin with pulling together a list of all the sources, both primary and secondary, that you have found so far. Separating those sources into groups based on the chapters for which you anticipate using them will give you a helpful overview of the ground each chapter is going to cover. After you have assembled your bibliography, in other words, you can move to drafting your chapter outline. Writing your chapter outline will give you a clearer sense of what your methodology is going to be, so writing your methodology section might be the next step. Finally, you can write your literature review and introduction.

Writing the prospectus backward in this way is helpful because it is often not until you have been working on it for a while that your brain finally extrudes the core questions around which the project as a whole revolves. However, there is no one-size-fits-all technique for prospectus writing. If you already have a clear idea of the project, and would find it easiest to systematically begin at the beginning and end at the end, go for it!

After You Have Drafted the Prospectus

Your Ph.D. program may require you to schedule a dissertation prospectus colloquium (or “defense”) with your committee once you have drafted the prospectus. If so, send the prospectus to your committee about a month before the colloquium date, in order to give faculty members enough time to read and make comments on it. They may suggest that you write a second draft in response to their comments before the colloquium. If so, make sure you budget enough time to do so.

Many students are uncertain how best to prepare for the colloquium itself, which usually lasts an hour, and entails reserving a room in advance so that all the members of your committee can gather in one place to discuss your project together before launching you into writing it. The colloquium is intended to be a relatively informal conversation, so don’t worry about preparing too much material for yours in advance. You can make a brief opening statement, lasting a couple of minutes, in which you recap how you arrived at the topic, and then segue into questions you have for your committee regarding aspects of the project you are unsure about, or simply to help you think about your topic in new ways.

Your committee will then, ideally, discuss your questions in order to arrive at some clarity. Dissertation colloquia can be grueling in that you may be called upon to defend the validity of your subject matter, scholarly intervention, or methodology. Defend your work remembering that your committee is eager to help, though, and that their feedback will craft the project into the best version of itself. Good luck!
