

Writing the Prospectus: A Guide.

This is general and schematic. Reading the introductions of scholarship on your topic may give you a sense of how others conceptualize a similar set of texts and approaches. The length of the prospectus should be ten to fifteen pages, double-spaced, not including the bibliography, which should be approximately three pages, double-spaced. Allowing enough time to write, rewrite, and rewrite several more times will likely result in a statement that is clear to your committee and useful to you. It should be as polished and in as final form as possible when you submit it. An informative title containing the key words of your project is also necessary. Working with your committee and taking on the changes your committee recommends will likely result in a more successful prospectus and writing process.

1) Introduce the problem. Sometimes a quotation from one of your key texts helps set out the questions you explore. An opening hook is nice, but not absolutely essential. Avoid solving the problem right away; why would we need a whole dissertation if the answer is already available? Sketching a problem, contradiction, tension, or paradox in a set of works from a specific time that all respond to X or express X—can be a useful way of developing a rich inquiry. It's good to have questions at the beginning of the project, and it is good to say explicitly: my questions are....

2) State the problem the dissertation explores. Use key words that indicate what thematic concepts are involved; name the authors and give at least a few examples of the texts or cultural artifacts more broadly speaking that you discuss. Explain why your problem is important. That no one has ever addressed it before is unlikely, or perhaps with good reason. The importance of the problem should not be that there are few treatments of it.

3) Justify the selection of works. Don't say "I choose these texts"-- say rather these texts represent key moments in this literature, key texts for these questions, and that you focus on them for this reason. Try to say why examining this set of texts yields something bigger than studying each one separately. Justify the selection of materials that you will analyze.

4) Describe the prevalent approaches to your problem and how your work builds on and departs from the already existing scholarship. Caution, it is easier to build on new trends than to turn the world upside down, you only have to make a contribution to scholarship, not invent a new wheel. By engaging with existing scholarship, your specific approach, interpretation, and contextualization--comes into sharper focus.

5) Define key terms. Do you refer to realism, modernity, biopower, postmodernism, subjectivity, identity, memory, or the archive? These are a few examples of terms used currently. How are you defining these terms? Whom are you using to define them? Take responsibility for your key conceptual terms by defining them in your own words. A patchwork quilt of quotations is not suitable in a prospectus; it is rather part of the

scaffolding that is preparation for writing a prospectus.

6) Provide in narrative form something resembling a topical outline. First you will discuss x and y, then you will discuss this other author, and so forth. The chapter outline you provide can and will change as you write.