

Guidelines for the Dissertation Prospectus

Stephen C. Behrendt

The dissertation prospectus is the formal document you present to your PhD Supervisory Committee once you have achieved candidacy and are preparing to move on to the dissertation as your full-time project. Normally you should plan to make this prospectus available to your committee soon after you are officially designated a candidate for the degree. At that point it is usual (though not necessarily mandatory) to have a meeting of the committee, at which meeting your prospectus will be the subject for discussion. Neither an “examination” nor a rite of passage, this meeting is the occasion for genuine discussion about what you plan to do, why, and how you plan to go about doing it. It is a good time to ask questions of your committee members, and for them to ask questions of you. The purpose, very simply, is to get everyone “on the same page” with regard to your project, and to offer an opportunity for the sort of additional brainstorming that can very often be really productive for everyone.

The prospectus should include the following:

1. A carefully considered, precise title that succinctly indicates the nature and direction of your project. This is not the time or place for the “cute” title. You are not required to furnish the obligatory colon midway through the title, nor is the quality of your title measured by the number of punctuation marks sprinkled throughout it.
2. A carefully constructed statement, **in one paragraph**, of the central question your dissertation will address. Every dissertation is essentially the answer to a single question, and so you need to begin by formulating the question before you can approach devising an answer. Because dissertations tend to be long, it is reasonable to assume that the question is probably a complex one, formulated in an informed and sophisticated fashion. Even a very long and complicated dissertation, however, may be driven by a startling simple question. So aim first for the simplest and most direct articulation of the question. Complications and qualifications can follow: they should not lead or dictate.
3. Another paragraph that explains the relationship of your thesis to previous scholarship in the field, both specific to your topic itself and relevant to the critical, theoretical, and methodological concerns you will bring to your dissertation. It is here that you indicate the particular need for the sort of project you propose to undertake.
4. Yet another paragraph, this one detailing the **methodology** that will guide your dissertation. Will it be a close reading (formalist or not)? An application of some particular poststructuralist theoretical model? A psychoanalytical study? A genre study?
5. Another paragraph, this one assessing the **feasibility** of your project. Can you do it here in Lincoln? Are the necessary materials available? If not, how will you get access to what

you need? Can you do all that needs to be done in the time available to you? Do you have the special tools (e.g. languages, computer skills, archival experience, etc.) required for the sort of project you are proposing.

6. A paragraph on something that is all too commonly overlooked: the **attractiveness** of your project. Put most simply, is this a project you really want to do? Why? Get beyond the superficial, and consider the professional aspects of the project. Will this project help you develop particular professional skills you want to have? If so, why do you want those skills? Will the project lead to publication(s)? If so, of what sort? Will pursuing this project help you when it comes to formulating and pursuing other projects--on other (related or not) subject--later in your career? What do you really want--and need--to get from this project?
7. Finally, you should present a selective bibliography of primary and secondary sources most immediately central to your project. In compiling this bibliography (and all bibliographies), you should develop annotations for the entries for your own use, so that you will be able to keep straight what is what, and which are the materials to which you will need to return. The bibliography you include in your prospectus (and which need not be annotated) should include some or all of the following:
 - a. Primary sources, with an indication of their accessibility (Love Library? available via interlibrary loan? located in special collections to which you may need to travel?);
 - b. Literary, critical, theoretical, or other studies directly related to your primary subject (particularly your author and her or his work[s]);
 - c. Critical or theoretical works not necessarily about your primary subject but significantly related as paradigms for some of the things you may wish to do in your own study;
 - d. Works that furnish methodological paradigms for what you might wish to do.

While there is no set length for this prospectus, you may wish to think in terms of 8 to 10 pages as a general guideline.