

Dissertation prospectus guidelines

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I. General guidelines

Purpose

The dissertation prospectus is a description of a large-scale research project. It has two goals:

- 1) to provide you with a blueprint for a successful dissertation;
- 2) to demonstrate to your advisors that you have that blueprint and are on your way to writing a successful dissertation.

Your prospectus committee will therefore read and evaluate your prospectus with a rigorous eye to catching any problems or future disasters now, while they can be easily fixed. Your readers will want to know: Do you have a viable and original dissertation topic? Is your central question significant? Do you know enough about your field and this subject to be able to carry out the project? Is your choice of material or data workable? Will your evidence and method in fact allow you to address your central question? Are you likely to be able to carry out this project and make a real contribution with it?

Your job is to put together a document that answers these questions. It should show that you have done the necessary preliminary work on your project, that you have identified and thought through its constituent elements, and that you have a good plan for carrying out the project.

Process

Developing a solid prospectus takes time! This is not something that can be thrown together in a couple of weeks; it normally takes several months. Work closely with your advisors during those months. You should not try to schedule your prospectus defense until the prospectus looks defensible to every member of your committee. To put it another way: the guidelines below should look intimidating when you first see them—they should look clear and self-evident by the time you are ready to defend your prospectus.

Length

The department guidelines currently favor a short proposal of 10 pages, but in most cases it will probably not be possible to do everything you need to do in so short a space. 15-20 pages is probably more realistic.

The defense

Make sure all your committee members have read your prospectus and think it is ready to defend *before* you schedule the defense. If committee members alert you to potential problems, make sure you address them fully before the defense. Again, keep in mind that all this takes time; make sure you build plenty of time into your planning.

II. Sections of the proposal

The following will not all be relevant in the same way for every prospectus; different sub-fields also have different requirements.

Two-paragraph summary

At the very start of your prospectus, provide an abstract or nutshell view of your project. (You may not be able to do this until the prospectus is nearly finished.) This is a demonstration that you can describe your project clearly; it is also an important help to your readers, who will know what you are doing as you then develop each of the following sections more fully.

Introduction to your thesis

Write this section not with your advisor in mind, since he or she already knows this, but for faculty members from across the department (or outside it) who may not know about key developments in your sub-discipline or where your topic relates to the field more generally. Why is your chosen topic significant in a broader sense? What are the big issues or driving questions in your field that your thesis grows out of and will respond to? What background does the reader need to know to understand how your topic fits into larger developments in the field? What is the scholarly landscape in which your project will take shape? What is the larger problem, ongoing question, or set of issues that your very focused study will contribute to more broadly?

One thing you are demonstrating here is that your topic relates to issues and questions that are currently driving your field – that you are not cooking up a thesis topic that has no relationship to things people in the field currently care about, i.e. that will have an obscure and isolated life out in left field. Another thing you are demonstrating here is that *you* know what key developments in your field are and understand how your work fits into them.

Historiography/review of the scholarship

The extent and nature of this part will vary with every prospectus; it may work best for your topic to have it be part of the introduction as described above. Review the relevant scholarship and its developments; lay out the state of the question. You are showing how the existing scholarship brings us logically to your proposed project. Keep in mind that beginning scholars tend to get a lot of mileage from pointing out how stupid everybody was a hundred years ago, as demonstrated by the completely wrongheaded or otherwise severely flawed approaches they took. It will be more impressive, and more useful, to show both what we have gained from past work and what questions still remain open. But questions of tone are partly a matter of sub-field and style; ask your advisor if you have any questions about yours. Overall, make clear how your project draws on the existing scholarship and will now move the scholarship forward.

What does the scholarly terrain relevant to your project look like and why?

What major developments have been directly relevant and/or helpful to your proposed project?

What questions are still left open, problems unsolved, or potentially illuminating aspects until now neglected that are directly relevant to your project? That sets up the next section: what will you do in response?

Your driving question/central issue/core argument

What is the core question your project is intended to answer? Or (depending on your field), what central interpretive issue or key problem is at stake that you think your proposed dissertation can help illuminate or solve? Why is this specific question or issue important to address, and why are you approaching it in this way? How will your focused dissertation be able to contribute to the larger driving questions in your field that you sketched out above?

Make sure to focus your project's question clearly enough that you can actually address it within the limits of a dissertation. You will want to avoid promising to contribute to several major theoretical issues at once, or saying you will revolutionize all of classical scholarship, or something like that. At the same time, make sure also that your question is not too narrow. There is nothing wrong with 'thinking big' as long as you are able to handle your topic. Dissertations should not be confined to arcane niches of scholarship and points of detail: sufficient breadth may enhance your chances in the job market and will make it easier to turn your thesis into a book (and to find a publisher, perhaps even sell a few copies).

Testing your argument

You cannot know exactly what you will find until you actually do the work, but you should have some clear ideas and analytical possibilities in mind as you go. Do you have two competing hypotheses in mind and can you explain the likely significance of alternative possible outcomes? How will you know you are right? How will you know you are wrong? What findings would disprove your argument? Most importantly, is your thesis set up in a way that permits falsification and the testing of competing explanations?

Testing a literary hypothesis is different from testing a historical one. A hypothesis about literature can operate within a text, between texts, or to locate a text within a contemporary context or historical tradition, or reception of that tradition. You must always be clear about which of these you are addressing and not move from one level to another without considering how applicable the criteria used for one argument are for another. For example, linguistic usage in one text is not necessarily exportable to other texts. And since all texts are produced in a particular cultural environment, it is important to know as much as possible about that environment, even if it is not central to your argument. Argument is not a series of observations about texts--though much that passes for literary analysis is just this. Observations about language, structure, narrative devices are all important in framing an argument, but do not constitute the argument itself. In constructing an argument consider all the evidence, not just the evidence that fits your hypothesis. If one or more pieces of evidence do not fit, your hypothesis is likely to be incorrect.¹

A historian or archaeologist might ask: What would it take to show that my argument is wrong, or less plausible than an alternative interpretation? Is it possible to test my argument in this way? If not, why -- is there something wrong with the question(s) I have set up, or is there some other reason? Also consider what is missing from the record: sometimes, what didn't happen may be as significant as what did happen, and can feature in your testing. An explicitly comparative perspective (both within and beyond antiquity) is often required to identify meaningful questions,

¹ Example: the argument of Jack Winkler's *Auctor et Actor* is that the *Golden Ass* is a hermeneutic game, not a serious text about religious conversion. He tests his hypothesis on the level of language, narrative, and cultural context. Winkler adduced (among many others) two pieces of evidence to support his claim about the conversion in the *Golden Ass*: the high priest of Isis was called Mithras (a competing religion), and the bald convert was a figure of ridicule elsewhere in the text (as well as in the contemporary culture). Others have rejected his thesis but not taken into account these features--rather they ignore them. After Winkler, any claim for the seriousness of the conversion depends on accounting for these anomalies within the context of the conversion narrative.

weigh the relative significance of different issues, and devise tests for your arguments. Avoid the pitfalls of inflexible theorizing: theoretical concepts and predictions can be essential in framing an argument and developing a thesis but must not pre-determine your findings and interpretations. In principle, the relevance to your argument of a particular body of theoretical thinking needs to be questioned and tested not just at the beginning but also while your project is underway, e.g. by considering the logical implications of applying a different set of theoretical premises.

Data

Exactly what material, evidence or data will you look at? Why are you selecting this material? What is its potential for your project? What, specifically, are the bounds of your chosen material? (E.g. one part of a particular work of literature, a particular selection of inscriptions or visual images, one site or a group of sites, one kind of material found at a particular selection of sites, etc.) Why focus on precisely this – not more, not less, not something different? Why are these the right bounds for your project?

If your chosen material is unpublished or otherwise especially difficult to work with, clarify how you have dealt with the challenge (e.g. you have lined up permission to work with unpublished texts or materials; you have had special training in osteology or papyrology or whatever the case may be).

Method

What will you actually *do* with this material? Think of your method as what allows you to link your material and your driving question. How will your chosen evidence or data allow you to address the central question or issue of your dissertation? You need to show your readers that this is a productive direction, that your evidence can be used in this way, and that your method will in fact provide answers to your overarching questions.

Preliminary fieldwork or other forms of research done

Give a clear sense of how far along you are with the necessary research and writing. For example, have you already identified and explored key sites or groups of material? Have you already done a preliminary analysis of the relevant textual information? Have you taken courses and written papers on precisely the theoretical or historiographic framework your project requires? Have you written or delivered a paper that will become one part of this thesis? List anything of this kind that you have done and specify how it fits into the larger project.

Preliminary outline and proposed chapter summaries

Include a chapter outline and summaries; this represents your best and fullest estimate at this point of how the dissertation will actually develop. Your schema may change substantially, depending on how the work actually develops, in which case you are free to change this outline. Even so, thinking through a preliminary outline will help you organize your thoughts and present your project as fully as possible at this stage. It will help you make sure to keep the driving question or core argument central and not get derailed into long chapters of background information or description.

What this outline with chapter summaries does is break down the overall argument. What are the individual sections you will need to build up your larger argument or develop your interpretation? What are the various issues or analyses or bodies of evidence that you will need to treat? Be able to justify the order of your proposed chapters; why, at least for now, does it make sense for the different sections to come in this particular order?

Keep in mind that each chapter will need to serve two purposes:

- 1) Each chapter substantially advances the larger argument of the dissertation.
- 2) Each chapter should also have its own argument and independent interest. (Think of each chapter as a potential article that might stand on its own – what would its contribution be independently of your larger project here?)

Contributions you hope to make

Make clear what you hope this project will do: e.g. answer a specific question, provide a new way of understanding your material, speak more broadly to a core issue in your field.

Timeline and plan of work

Give a practical sense of how you will actually go about carrying out this project. Include required teaching or other commitments that will interfere with your dissertation work. Include needed library research, fieldwork or archival work; estimate where and when you will do these various things and for how long; explain what library and material resources you will need beyond Stanford's, where you will find them and when and for how long you will be working with those. Also list what sources of support you envision for your dissertation work (departmental fellowship, teaching, outside fellowships you plan to apply for, especially if you need to be abroad, etc.). When do you plan to finish? Talk to your advisor about that; your timing has implications for funding, going on the job market, etc.

Bibliography

Your prospectus bibliography should show your readers that you are aware of the major work that has been done on your key issues, your chosen material, and/or your method. It should cover the relevant bases regardless of the language in which the scholarship is written. If the major work on your topic has been done in Russian and you do not read Russian, that is a problem; if the key work is spread across various languages and you do not read one of them, that is also a problem.

It is often useful to divide your bibliography into relevant subject headings (e.g. theoretical work, field reports, comparative studies; major publications of an ancient work, including texts and commentaries, major secondary scholarship on that work, major comparative or theoretical work that informs what you are doing). This helps you make sure you have covered the areas you need to cover, and lets your readers see that you have done so.

Other supporting materials

Include any illustrations or other supporting materials that need to be part of your prospectus.