

University of Louisville

Humanities Doctoral Program

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. Its value lies in helping you and your committee get an initial handle on your project. In the Humanities Ph.D. Program, we have chosen to break the writing of the prospectus into 2 blocks:

- A Summary of your Research or Creative Project (**Prospectus - Brief**), including the bibliography and a **tentative** title for the project (not necessarily the definitive title of the dissertation) to be turned in before your comprehensive exam.
- A complete Dissertation Prospectus (**Prospectus - Long**) to be turned in by the end of the semester after successful completion of the comprehensive exam and that integrates the Prospectus Brief with both the work done in the exam essays as well as the feedback received after the exam.

Although your prospectus may change both in its finer and larger details, another primary purpose of writing it 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?
- Why does it matter?

Presumably, by this point you have identified, and discussed with your advisor(s), a general problem or a research question that you hope will be the focus of your dissertation. Having a clear idea of the structure of the prospectus is a useful way to move from the general research problem to a finished prospectus.

In most cases, a prospectus should be composed of the following parts:

TITLE PAGE	Use Title Page Template (PDF on our website)
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 <u>not now known, understood, or appreciated</u> ? Are there two fields which can be bridged? (This is particularly important for an interdisciplinary program like ours) 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 exploring or trying to solve; and highlights its significance. For PAL students, while the project itself may take different forms, the introduction should contain an overview of the creative project and

	an overview of the critical work, including the central topics, themes, stylistic methodologies, etc.
LITERATURE REVIEW	A concise review of what has been published on the topic up to now. Specifically, how will the proposed dissertation differ from, or expand upon, previous work? The literature review section is <u>essential for both C3T and PAL dissertations</u> : it shows how you are participating in existing scholarly debates; demonstrates that you know the relevant literature in your area of specialization; and indicates how your work will contribute something new and advance the field.
METHODOLOGY	This section is <u>crucial</u> for an interdisciplinary program like ours. Your methodology should indicate which disciplines you will bring together in your project and why; how you will conduct and structure your project; and which texts/case studies/problems you will be considering. Will you be working primarily with primary sources available in libraries or archives? 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? For PAL students, this section will provide a detailed survey of research published and creative work produced to date relevant to the project, and explaining how your project, as an intervention, will both build upon this and diverge from it
CHAPTER OUTLINE (Prospectus Long)	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 autonomous sections, or are they tracing an overarching narrative trajectory?
SCHEDULE OF COMPLETION (Prospectus Long)	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.
BIBLIOGRAPHY	This section lists the main texts – read during the coursework as well as those read to prepare for the research project – on which the comprehensive exam will be based. The bibliography should count approximately 100-150 items, including both primary and critical materials, which may include historical documents, art objects, book sections or chapters, articles, and more. There are a number of ways in which you can organize the sources: you can separate them into primary and secondary sources, or divide the sources by discipline in order to show the interdisciplinarity of your project.

Length

The **Prospectus Brief** should be between five and ten pages, double-spaced, excluding the bibliography. It should have a **title** for the research project (not necessarily the definitive title of the dissertation) and consists of a **summary** of the research area to be covered by the Comprehensive Exam plus a working **bibliography**. It should be approved

by all members of the Doctoral Committee and the Program Director prior to scheduling the exam. Please refer to the **Ph.D. Handbook** for more information about the Comprehensive Exam process.

The **Prospectus Long** should be about twenty-five pages (approximately 6,000 words), including the bibliography, and it serves as a blueprint for the Dissertation, demonstrating to the Committee and others that you will have a grounded, viable, important project to carry out in your dissertation. The Chair and all Members must sign off on the completed Prospectus, which must then be submitted to the Director of Graduate Studies for final approval.

Timeline for Drafting the Prospectus

Most students give themselves a semester to write their prospectus. If they have finished their coursework in the summer of their second year, for instance, they aim to have the prospectus completed by the end of the fall 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 coursework readings and new readings, 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 the Prospectus Brief: Preparing for the Comprehensive Exam

Our Ph.D. Program requires you to schedule your comprehensive examination after your **Prospectus Brief** has been approved by your Committee and by the Director of Graduate Studies. Make sure you give your committee enough time to review the prospectus and make comments on it. They may suggest that you write a second draft in response to their comments before sending it to the DGS. Send the prospectus to your committee about a month and a half before the semester deadline (**October 23; March 23; June 23**). After the committee's approval, make sure you send the Prospectus Brief to the DGS for final approval.

Many students are uncertain how best to prepare for the exam itself, which can be taken in-house and lasts 3 1/2 hours, or as a 72-hour take-home exam. In both cases, you need to schedule your exam date well in advance with the Administrative Specialist who oversees the administration of the exam.

After the exam, your committee will, ideally, give you some feedback on your exam essays. Remember that your committee is eager to help, and that their feedback will craft the project into the best version of itself. After you have successfully passed your comprehensive exam, you will have an entire semester to use the exam essays and the committee's feedback to prepare the complete dissertation prospectus (**Prospectus – Long**): this marks the official beginning of your dissertation writing process. Good luck!