

WRITING A DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS

prepared by

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A dissertation prospectus is designed to be a useful tool, one which clarifies your project —its scope, subject matter, method, rationale — for yourself, for your dissertation committee and for potential sources of financial support. The prospectus should describe the questions your dissertation seeks to answer, describe the general field of research to which your project belongs and situate your work within that terrain. Specifically, it should describe how you will go about answering the questions you raise and explain the potential significance of the completed study to the field.

Begin the prospectus with a **working title** for the dissertation. This need not, at this stage, be elegant, but should be descriptive of the project.

The text of a prospectus is usually between 8 to 12 pages long. **The first section** should give your readers an overview of the project: your subject matter, what is interesting about it and the larger questions you will be pursuing. This is where you can make your first statement about the consequences of your research for other scholars. This section also provides any necessary background information that your readers will need to understand the significance of your project. It is appropriate, briefly, to situate your work in relation to previous scholarship, though try to avoid setting up straw men.

One productive strategy is to begin with a specific example of your subject matter, as for instance a particular image, building, or theory, and use a brief analysis to show your readers how the questions you are asking arise from the material itself.

Very important is clarity on the point of method. What questions will you be asking of your materials? How will you elicit answers? What models — art historical or otherwise — do you have in mind as you construct your study or build your thesis?

The body of the prospectus should map the contours of the dissertation with brief discussions of each chapter or section. It is helpful to name the chapters and devote a paragraph or a page to the content of each. List the particular objects of study for each chapter and the main primary and secondary source material you will be using in pursuing that part of your project.

When you write your prospectus, you will probably not yet have a full argument in hand, and certainly will not have mastered the full range of data. But the prospectus should make it clear that you do have a **thesis**, and some data relevant to it. It is helpful to keep in mind that the prospectus is just that, a prospective account of the project, and that your research will inevitably lead to modifications, sometimes radical, in your thesis. It is not

unusual for the finished dissertation to contain material that was not part of the original prospectus.

Appendices are often attached to the prospectus and contain relevant information not addressed in the main text. A bibliographic appendix is essential. This can either be a critical bibliography or a simple listing of primary and secondary sources. It can be arranged in a number of ways: alphabetically, chapter by chapter, thematically, or in whatever order best suits your subject matter and method. Another helpful appendix is a preliminary object list for the dissertation (with locations), which may include illustrations of selected objects.

The object of the dissertation prospectus — beyond clarifying your own thinking — is to give your readers confidence that you have a good idea and a clear project in mind, that you know the field in question and that you have an orderly pattern for pursuing your research and organizing your findings. But most importantly, it gives you an opportunity to explain why your project is of consequence, and it permits your advisors to aid you effectively in achieving the best possible dissertation.