

Master's Thesis Prospectus Guide

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A prospectus is a useful tool for students and advisors alike. It should sketch out the main questions, parameters, historiographical context, sources, methodologies, and organization of your thesis. By doing this you will be able to clarify your research and writing objectives, make sure your work has the level of originality, scope, and scholarly significance appropriate for a master's thesis, and convince your thesis committee that it is time to turn you loose on your own final project. Also you will have a commonly agreed upon framework for your thesis. What follows is a guide explaining how a useful and effective prospectus should look. With clear and straightforward prose, you should be able to complete this in 5-6 single-spaced pages. Specific expectations will vary depending on your advisor. Standard rules for format and good writing apply.

Topic and Research Questions

This section should introduce readers to your topic, its general significance, what you are interested in about this topic, and it should end with the central research questions you hope to answer with your thesis. Remember these should be “how” and “why” questions—keep them fairly broad and simple at this stage, since you want to emphasize the significance of your topic and how you will approach it rather than the details you will need to corral for the final product. Resist the urge to fill a paragraph with questions and focus instead on a few central ones. Maybe two juicy paragraphs are enough for this part—not more than a page single-spaced.

Scope and Approach

This can be part of the section above, and should be one additional paragraph. Here you should address why your thesis begins and ends when it does; what content you are going to cover and what you will not. Even if the scope of your thesis is determined by availability of sources or some quite practical matter, you need to be able to justify it intellectually as well. As for approach (or methodology), think about what kind of history you will be doing: social, intellectual, economic, political, something else, or some combination? Will you be interdisciplinary and if so, how and why? Your approach will depend upon the kinds of sources you will be using as well as the analytical tools you employ to interpret them. Accordingly, you can elaborate on your discussion of approach in your secondary and primary source essays (below).

Secondary Source Essay

Here is where you lay out the significance and originality of your project by showing how it fits into and plays off of the existing literature. You will need to have done some historiographical work in order to write this part. Describe each set of relevant writings by issue or topic (one per paragraph makes sense), identifying the main arguments for each (citing the books and essays that contain them as you go) and how

they relate to what you plan to do. It's a good idea to articulate how these works will help you answer your research questions, how your research questions build on these arguments or push them forward, or both. You don't need to have read every single book and article you cite to write this part, but you will need to know basically how they fit together analytically, you will need to recognize which arguments/authors are central, and you will need to identify relevant historiographical debates. Here you can also discuss briefly books whose methodology or approach will be important to you, even if their topic doesn't relate to yours directly. By the end you should have established how your work relates to what has already been done, thereby illustrating how it is new, interesting, and significant. This section might take you three pages or so.

Primary Source Essay

This section should set out the different kinds of primary sources you plan to use, describe them briefly (identify specific collections, their scope, where they are), and show *how* you will use them to help answer your research questions. I would do a short paragraph on each type of source (newspapers, oral histories, business records, etc.). Your committee will want to be sure you have enough sources to sustain a thesis, that you can actually get your hands on them, and that you have enough different kinds of sources to support your conclusions. It is also nice to show, when you discuss how you plan to use each source, that you have a sense of their strengths and weaknesses. This section should be shorter, roughly one page.

Chapter Outline

Now it is time to lay out (tentatively) how you want to organize your ideas, and how you plan to write them. Write a short paragraph explaining what you want to do in each chapter—what topics you'll cover, sources you plan to feature, and questions you want to answer. Play around with different ways to organize your work before you settle on one, and don't be surprised if this outline changes once you get into your research and writing. This outline should take maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page.

Writing Schedule

Depending on your desired level of structure, procrastination, and panic, you and your advisor might want to include this section at the end. Here is where you write down when you will hand in each chapter. This may be frightening, but the good news is it will ensure your advisor has time to give you effective feedback and that you have time to respond to it. This is important since you know there is no good writing, only good re-writing, and since it will make your defense a much more enjoyable experience for all.

Bibliography

Most advisors will want to see a bibliography accompanying the prospectus, especially to make sure you have already identified enough accessible primary sources.

Be sure to use Turabian or Chicago Manual of Style for citation form. It is often useful to divide your bibliography into two sections: primary and secondary sources.

Now What?

Once you have written your prospectus, you need to give it to your advisor, get feedback, and agree on a final draft. The next step is to meet to discuss it with your whole committee. Committee members will share comments and concerns, and ask you to make revisions if they think it is necessary. Once the committee agrees on your prospectus, they are in effect turning you loose to research and write the project you have laid out for them. If you want to make significant changes along the way, you will need clear it with them first. They, in turn, will need to justify changing any expectations they might have for your project.