

Thoughts on producing a prospectus  
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Although we have supervised many dissertations over many years, we doubt that any one set of rules would work in some general way to yield a defensible prospectus. So we try in what follows simply to provide some insights derived from our dissertation supervising in the hope that they may facilitate the prospectus process. We assume that these insights will need all sorts of modifications in particular cases.

Two aspects of prospectus writing are obvious and yet also merit comment. A graduate student must start to write the prospectus and then must finish. Both tasks can prove to be difficult and many students find one to be much more difficult than the other. Our experience suggests the following kind of writing/research strategies for graduate students to deal with these two aspects.

1. At an earliest stage, be open to different *broadly defined* dissertation ideas, be willing to play with them (i.e. to consider, discard, and modify them in your mind), and discuss them with fellow graduate students and interested faculty. Pay special attention to those ideas/topics that seem to hold your interest and hopefully excite you. We say this because the writing of a prospectus and dissertation is hard, often lonely work with very little if any emotional and/or financial support in and by this society. Too often others – distant and even close family members, friends from your other life, neighbors, and so forth - will have very little if any understanding of what it is you are doing. Hence to deal with all of this, you will need more than anything else an idea/topic that has real meaning and importance for you. Believing in your project's larger importance can sustain you through to completion when the inevitable problems of the dissertation and life in general recur.

2. Next, meet with your prospective chair or co-chairs and discuss these ideas with the initial goal of gradually narrowing the choice of topic to a very few or if possible only to one. Whether the graduate student makes the choice of topic with others' inputs or on her/his own, once the choice is made, we have found it useful to ask the graduate student for two or three pages summarizing (a) the chosen topic, and (b) the rationale whereby the student chose it. The student's response has usually been revealing in important ways. For example, it has proven very significant if these pages prove very difficult to write or cannot be produced. As soon as possible such a situation should become the object of discussions between the student and his/her dissertation committee. The goal of those discussions is either to arrive at a different topic choice or else at new way to resume the student's work on producing a few pages on the old topic. We have found the latter to be what most often happens. What our experience has taught us is that the worst possible outcome is lack of contact between the student and the collaborating faculty; that can extend a temporary problem into a long delay in getting the prospectus writing underway.

3. Once these initial few pages are completed (and regardless of how many revisions that may require so that student and faculty advisors are satisfied), the next step is to expand

them into a full prospectus. We have found a twenty page prospectus, not counting footnotes, appendixes, or references, to be sufficient. What has served best as a guide for students is to conceive of the prospectus as a plan of operation: an outline showing how the proposed dissertation will structure and develop the central arguments in the student's chosen topic. It is important not to confuse the prospectus with the dissertation itself. The prospectus does not make the arguments; it simply outlines their structure and basic logic of development.

4. We have found that certain problems constantly confront students working on prospectuses. For example, it is not easy to identify and clearly specify the proposed dissertation's central idea or question. It is likewise difficult to distinguish between central and sub-themes. Yet, reaching clarity on these central dimensions of the prospectus has, in our experience, repeatedly been a key moment in the evolution of a successful dissertation. Not struggling through to a prospectus that is clear on this basic logical structure produces larger and more intractable problems later during the research and writing of the dissertation itself. To take another example, students understandably find it difficult to give up on relatively more marginal aspects of their dissertation topic that are interesting, on which they have spent research time and energy, etc, yet are aspects not central to what has finally emerged as the dissertation's core contributions. Tough decisions need to be made to delimit the scope of the dissertation – and to express these limits in the prospectus – in order to keep the dissertation under control and within boundaries of what the student can produce in a reasonable amount of time. Dropping certain subthemes can be a difficult but crucial moment in the crafting of a successful prospectus. To take a final example, once a student has defined and written into the prospectus both the central theme(s) and the sub-themes to be treated in the dissertation, it is crucial for the prospectus to specify as well how theme and sub-theme will be connected in the dissertation. Clarity on this at the prospectus stage will save great distress later in the dissertation-writing stage. Hence it is a pre-requisite for us to agree to a defense of the prospectus.

5. The prospectus must state at its outset why the writer thinks the chosen topic is interesting and important. The point here is to persuade the reader (and the writer too) of the worth of the project. If done well, this task will evolve into the writer's eventual prospective job seminar. In explaining the worth of the research, it is helpful to show how its prospective results differ from and/or provide an interesting extension of what already exists in the relevant literature. Doing this may well take five to six pages of a twenty page prospectus and perhaps an entire chapter of the proposed dissertation. (Of course, in a history of thought dissertation, it will take that many more prospectus pages and dissertation chapters.) Additionally, it may be useful for the prospectus to include in a concluding section a brief yet informed speculation in regard to consequences of the dissertation work for others' research.

6. Based on the above points, we offer some specific suggestions as to the contents and page breakdowns of a prospectus.

- The opening two or three pages should be devoted to stating what the central theme or problem in the dissertation is and how and in what ways the related sub-themes connect to produce a logical and clear study.

- The remaining pages offer a plan of what will be done to explore concretely that identified theme/problem. We think it useful to break this plan down into proposed dissertation chapters. Perhaps five pages of explanation for each proposed chapter. Our experience suggests that three core dissertation chapters - amounting to 15 pages of prospectus explanation - to be sufficient. Again, the main aim of the writer over these pages is to inform the committee what is planned. Nonetheless, we also are aware that it is next to impossible to avoid actually doing some of the expected analysis. To control the prospectus writing - meaning to get it finished in a reasonable time period - we suggest that it present only a glimpse into what the analysis might look like. We cannot give any exact rule here, but in the past we have suggested to students that they offer a bit of analysis to feel confident that the project is viable. Finally, once the 15 pages are completed, a couple of pages summarizing the research including its importance suffice.

- When empirical work is part of a dissertation, we ask the student to add to the prospectus an appendix of a few pages outlining the methodology to be employed. For example, some students have wanted to conduct samples of a population - to provide empirical information on the class nature of, say, an agricultural region or some particular population grouping. We ask them to include an appendix attached to the prospectus outlining their plan of empirical research. Other times proposed empirical work can be folded into the prospectus itself without any appendix. For example, there may be a dissertation chapter that offers an empirical story with supporting data that elaborates the central theme of the dissertation. In these cases, we ask the student to include in the prospectus a brief discussion of how that empirical research will be carried out and how it will elaborate the theoretical argument made in other chapters.