**THE DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS**

**OFFICIAL GUIDELINES**

from http://english.columbia.edu/doctor-philosophy#The Dissertation Prospectus

**Aims**

Because it describes work that you have yet to complete, the dissertation prospectus is

an unfamiliar sort of academic genre. So what should you try to accomplish in this

document?

Put most simply, the dissertation prospectus should offer a provisional account of (1)

what your argument is, (2) why it matters, and (3) what body of evidence you will draw

on to substantiate it. Your “argument” might be expressed as a focused research

question, as a hypothesis, or as a tentative thesis. In explaining why it matters, you

should outline how your dissertation will contribute to, or change, the existing

scholarship on the topic. And in describing a body of evidence, you should indicate

which primary and secondary texts are essential to your project.

In addition to these general aims, your prospectus should provide answers to the

following questions:

• Why are you addressing this topic? How does it build upon your previous work

and how is your approach, archive, or perspective significant?

• Do you make use of any special methodological or theoretical perspective? How

is it appropriate to your topic and body of evidence?

• What is the proposed organization of the dissertation?

Contents

If these are its intellectual goals, what practical elements should the dissertation

prospectus include?

• A title. Don’t be too cute: it should indicate the topic and emphasis of your

project.

• The body of the prospectus. This should describe your project, outline its

potential interest and scholarly significance, and identify your core objects of

study.

• A chapter breakdown: write tentative accounts of each chapter, dedicating a

page or less to each.

• A timeline, outlining what you intend to complete and when.

• If applicable, a description of special needs: e.g., do you need to travel or

conduct specific archival research, develop new linguistic or technical skills, or

use special equipment?

• A working bibliography. Although this might include a few important works you

have not yet read, it should mostly represent the research you have done so far.

**Length**

Your prospectus should be between 1500-3000 words or 7-10 double-spaced pages in

length, not counting the tentative schedule, description of special needs, and working

bibliography. Longer prospectuses will not be approved.

**Prospectus meeting**

You should complete a first draft of the prospectus by September 15 of your fourth year

and submit it to your dissertation committee to review. When the student and

committee are agreed that the prospectus is in the nearly final draft, the student should

take the initiative to schedule a prospectus meeting. This meeting, to be attended by

the student and her/his entire committee, should occur not later than October 1. The

purpose of the prospectus meeting is to provide you with a forum for discussion of the

dissertation's conception and development. It is not a defense of the prospectus.

Rather, it is an occasion for the student to get coordinated feedback before he/she

completes a final revision.

**Committee Approval**

Before filing the prospectus with the department, you need to complete any essential

revisions recommended at the prospectus meeting and have your committee members

sign the Prospectus Approval Form (available from the Graduate Coordinator, Virginia

Kay). If one or more of your committee members is off campus, an email to the DGS will

suffice in lieu of their signature. You must complete this step in time to file the

prospectus by November 1.

**Filing the Prospectus and Final Approval**

Once your prospectus has been approved by your faculty advisors, the next step is to

file it with the department. Bring the Prospectus Approval Form and a copy of the

prospectus to the Graduate Coordinator before November 1. The DGS will read your

prospectus and decide whether to approve it or recommend further revision. You will

be notified of the DGS’s decision via email.

**Timeline**

• May-September: Independent work on dissertation prospectus

• September 15: First draft to be submitted to dissertation committee

• October 1: Deadline for prospectus meeting

• November 1: Deadline for filing approved prospectus with the DGS

Sample Prospectuses

Several prospectuses have been selected as examples of the genre. They have been

chosen from a variety of fields and represent the diversity of methodological and

theoretical approaches to doctoral research in English and Comparative Literature at

Columbia.

These prospectuses have been uploaded to a collaboration site for graduate students

in Courseworks (ADMN 1069.001 Resources for Graduate Students). Please request

access from the English Department administrator.