

GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING A DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS

Length requirements: 5-10 pages, double-spaced. Students are encouraged to write about their proposed dissertation research as concisely as possible while outlining the central research question/problem, methodology, and organization. The prospectus demonstrates the student's potential ability to undertake the research required to complete the dissertation. Students should work with their advisors for more detailed expectations and requirements for the prospectus.

THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION: The doctoral dissertation must be an original and significant contribution to knowledge. By definition, the dissertation should:

1. demonstrate a capacity for original and independent research by creating new knowledge or describing research that has not been done previously;
2. reveal the student's ability to analyze, interpret, and synthesize information;
3. demonstrate the student's knowledge of the literature relating to the project or at least acknowledge of prior scholarship on which the dissertation is built;
4. present results in a sequential, logical and literate manner;
5. describe the methods and procedures used;
6. display the student's ability to discuss fully and coherently the meaning of the results.

SUGGESTED COMPONENTS OF A PROSPECTUS

I. Statement of the Research Question/Problem ("What exactly is this study about?")

This is a concise thesis statement, detailing the exact nature of the study. It should not be a lengthy introduction designed to entice the reader or review historical context. It must be a clear statement of the thesis that delineates the research problem. Sometimes written in the form of a question, the statement may be followed by a series of sub-questions that logically follow each other and must be answered in order to resolve the overall thesis. Remember to construct your question carefully – the mere shape of the question can affect the entire nature of your research. One of the more common problems among dissertations is a poorly constructed thesis question (e.g., are you really asking "what happened" or perhaps "why it happened?").

II. Definition of Terms ("What do you mean by that?")

Identify and clarify the key terms and concepts that are central to the study. Explain if you are redefining a word or merely limiting its definition to a more precise, applicable meaning. The significant terms you identify will shape your analysis. They should be defined clearly and applied consistently.

III. Justification ("Why did you undertake this study?")

Discuss your reasons for doing this thesis. Usually this can be an exploration of inadequate research in the past or recent discoveries that have led to this new thesis. The justification is traditionally a look back at why this study was necessary.

IV. Significance ("What good will this study do?")

Unlike the Justification, the Significance looks ahead at what this study will ultimately contribute to the field – an essential and often overlooked part of a dissertation. This section clearly places your work into the scholastic continuum of your field and defends its ultimate survival. Philosophically, this may be the most important part of the entire chapter, foreshadowing the dissertation's conclusion.

V. Methods and Procedures ("What is your theoretical approach to this study?")

An explanation of your methodological approach to the material. You should first be able to define your scholarly approach and identify any specific methods of analysis to be used. Then you may want to explain any necessary procedures, conceptual or practical, needed to realize your approach. A procedure may be anything from an identification of the type of research materials used to a discussion of various evaluative strategies employed.

VI. Review of the Literature ("Are you familiar with all the pertinent and current research in this area?")

Demonstrate your knowledge in the specific area of your study. This section should review mainly those works that deal most directly with your thesis and may cover major works peripherally related, especially if your thesis is a comparative study involving one or more outside fields. The purpose here is to assess the present state of research in your area, to examine any errors, controversies, or inconsistencies in the established literature, to evaluate the validity of sources, and to properly place your dissertation among the body of literature in your field. Your bibliography will demonstrate thoroughness, so keep this section focused on the most critical studies your dissertation will engage.

VII. Feasibility ("How is this study possible?")

Explain the means by which you accomplished this study (not to be confused with Methods and Procedures). Usually this section discusses accessibility of materials and sources, financial aid or grants used, special trips, skills or interviews required, etc. The point is to demonstrate the extent of your thoroughness in uncovering, acquiring, and utilizing research material. (It doesn't make much sense to research 18th Century Italian Opera if you can't read Italian.)

VIII. Review of the Remaining Chapters ("How have you organized this study?")

Provide a basic outline of the rest of the dissertation. Each chapter ought to be explained as the most appropriate means to answer the various questions derived from the Statement of the Research Question/Problem. The organization of chapters should be a logical fulfillment of the Methods and Procedures, culminating in the Summary and Conclusions.

IX. Full Bibliography (in addition to the 5-10 page prospectus)

Provide a thorough bibliography that demonstrates your knowledge of existing materials related to your study.