Guidelines for M.A. Thesis and Ph.D. Dissertation Prospectuses

If you are nearing the end of your first spring as an M.A. student or your Qualifying Exams as a Ph.D. student, you need to start thinking ahead to the prospectus for your thesis or dissertation. The prospectus is a plan of action—not an outline, but a description—that is required of graduate students in English before they are allowed to begin writing a thesis or dissertation. *It is vital that before writing the prospectus, you do a great deal of research to make sure you are planning an original project that does not repeat arguments published by other critics.* M.A. students should start researching the prospectus and building a working bibliography during that first summer and discuss this work with their Advisory Committee Chair early in their second fall semester. Ph.D. students normally write the prospectus and submit it to their Dissertation Committee Chair within four months of passing their Qualifying Exams but may write it—or a draft of it—as part of the process of studying for their Qualifying Exams.

Purpose

Your prospectus is a crucial tool in three ways:

1) A prospectus lets your committee know your initial ideas about your thesis or dissertation, thus enabling them to help you fine-tune your plans—by, for example, suggesting additional primary or secondary works for you to read, helping you figure out a more useful argumentative structure, or telling you that you need to go back to the drawing board.

2) It is likely that while writing your thesis or dissertation—and virtually certain that while writing your dissertation—you will at times lose track of the overall shape of your argument or the purpose of your project. At those times, it is a relief to be able to consult your own prospectus, which can set you

back on track and bring order to the chaos of your thoughts. A good prospectus can serve this purpose even when, as is often the case, you have changed various aspects of your initial plans since writing the prospectus.

3) Having written a prospectus will help you a great deal in the future, when you will have to write similar documents for potential book publishers, conference organizers, professional fellowship committees, and institutions that offer grants.

Length

The prospectus can be either about five pages (plus a bibliography) or about ten to thirty pages (plus a bibliography), depending on how much research you have done beforehand and the nature of your project. Only you and your director can decide which format will be most useful for you. Write the longer version if you believe that with little revision you will be able to use it as the introductory chapter of your thesis or dissertation. If you are not at the right stage in your research to produce an introductory chapter, choose the shorter version. (A ten-page introductory chapter might be an appropriate length for one chapter of a fifty-page M.A. thesis; a thirty-page introductory chapter might not be too long for a 200- to 400-page dissertation.)

Components of a Prospectus

Below is an annotated list of the normal components of a prospectus. Not every prospectus contains all of these components, but if you decide to omit any, discuss the omission with your advisor, first. If your thesis or dissertation is unusual in some way—say, if your research will consist mostly of classroom observation or if you will not be analyzing texts—your advisor may suggest a slightly different form for the prospectus.

The nature of your project may lead you to change the order of these components or to combine some of them.

1) Briefly explain your project. If you are writing an introductory chapter, you will want to articulate the central argument or arguments of your thesis or dissertation, but if you are writing the shorter form, you may want to stick to the traditional expectation for a prospectus, which is that it will *not* state the writer's argument. The reasons for this are similar to those in the sciences: one cannot report scientific results until the experiment is made; one can only advance an hypothesis and keep one's mind open. Similarly, the literary scholar cannot predict an argument until the process of writing chapters has produced that argument. Whether or not you state your central argument, however, you must go far beyond simply describing a *topic*. Focus on describing the central *issue* that you wish to address in your thesis or dissertation—that is, the problem with which you want to grapple. Your description of this issue should be unique; it should not look like it could refer to any article or book previously published by another scholar (or by yourself, for that matter).

2) Describe what has been done before in this research area. The purpose of this part of your prospectus is not to summarize entire articles or books by other scholars, nor is it to demonstrate how much you have read. Instead, the purpose is to indicate that you are entering an ongoing scholarly conversation and that you have something new and useful to offer to that conversation. If no other scholar has ever written about the author whose work you are going to address, you can still point to scholars who have asked related questions, who have addressed authors writing in similar genres in the same historical period, or the like.

3) State explicitly how your approach to your issue or authors will differ from what has been done before, and explain how your work will contribute usefully to the body of literary or rhetorical scholarship. You do not need to claim that your project represents a mind-blowingly new development in the history of literary or rhetorical criticism; still less do you need to claim that all scholars before you have been nitwits. Again, remember that literary and rhetorical scholarship are collections of conversations and that your responsibility is to write something that will carry at least one of those conversations forward in a fresh way. (Remember, too, that within a very few years you are quite likely to meet some of the scholars to whom you refer. You want them to be interested in what you have to say even when you are strongly disagreeing with them.)

4) Explain what your methodology will be. You need not espouse one "-ism," and indeed, most literary scholars these days use parts of at least two or three sorts of theory. The aim of this part of your prospectus is to demonstrate to your committee that you have not simply defaulted to the one type of theory you know; instead, you have thoughtfully chosen to use certain methodologies because you believe they will be the most useful in addressing the particular topic and issue you have chosen.

5) List and describe each of the chapters of your work. You needn't have chapter titles yet, and again, you probably will not want to list the central argument of each chapter. (If you are writing your prospectus as an introductory chapter, you may want to list the central argument of each chapter, but you will probably have to come back and revise that portion of your introduction heavily after writing the entire thesis or dissertation.) Here, it is particularly important not only to describe the anticipated topic of each chapter (e.g. "painful self-awareness in *Wuthering Heights"*) but also to describe

its *issue*—the literary-critical problem that it is addressing. If you describe only a *topic* for each chapter, you will likely find yourself writing in circles a few months from now, as you realize that you are answering some of the same questions in your second chapter that you answered in your first. Putting a great deal of thought into this part of your prospectus now will save you a great deal of anxiety, frustration, and even panic later on.

6) Attach a Working Bibliography several pages long, impeccably proofread and formatted according to MLA guidelines. You need not have read everything listed in the bibliography, and it is expected that you will both delete and add items later on while writing the thesis or dissertation. However, you should have read at least parts of most of the items on your list, enough to have a shrewd idea that they will be useful to your project. List both primary and secondary works. Your bibliography may consist of one list, or you may separate it into categories of some sort—e.g. all works pertaining to one of your authors, then all pertaining to another of your authors; or primary works and then secondary works; or works addressing rhetorical aspects of your project and then works addressing political aspects. You need not annotate your bibliography, though if you include a work that might look out of place, unscholarly, or otherwise odd to your committee members, you can always add a sentence of explanation at the end of the entry.

Sample Prospectuses

If you are a graduate student in our department, you can access samples of prospectuses for M.A. theses and Ph.D. dissertations recently defended by students in the department. To access the sample prospectuses, go to the secure SharePoint site at: https://uasharepoint.uark.edu/sites/engl/GradAdvising/default.aspx