HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Department of English

Prospectus

A prospectus presents a SUBJECT OR TOPIC in the form of questions or problems, often coupled with tentative answers or hypotheses. It outlines how the questions and problems will be addressed (what is sometimes called critical approach or methodology), and its annotated bibliography offers a brief guide to pertinent materials, their relative importance and particular value. The idea is to receive advice early on in the process. By articulating the central issues in your project as you see them (of course, they might change), you'll begin to see how much detail you can define and address. You need to have made some serious, preliminary decisions. We have examples available to examine.

We suggest that you consider the following things as you shape your prospectus. The most important thing for your future work is to set a clear agenda for you, your prospectus reader, and your advisors.

A prospectus requires a good, preliminary title, preferably descriptive and straightforward – titles are important and formative – and it needs to give a clear sense of the *scope* of your project. *Scope* largely means the specific texts to be covered. You need to find roughly the right amount of material for your topic and approach: there should be room for ideas to grow, but they can't get out of hand. Not all theses are best framed as *questions* in final practice, though questions are useful to start. You might already have tentative answers to these questions, some hypothesis or hunch about explanations or judgments. Putting those into prose as early as you can—at whatever stage of your writing—is vital. No one keeps a project this long mentally in control and waits for a final moment to write. Beginning with your prospectus, the writing and revising comes in stages and is more or less continual.

A prospectus also describes a STRUCTURE, which almost always has a first part that introduces or defines your topic, then two (or perhaps three) chapters, and sometimes a separate conclusion (often with its own title). It's helpful to indicate how you will *distribute* ideas and texts across your study.

The whole of a thesis should be greater than the sum of its parts. You're not connecting shorter essays, but rather working towards an integrated whole. It's worth thinking now about how to *articulate* your structure to make that happen. Consider ways to break your chapters into SECTIONS, on which you can work separately, both for ease of writing through fall and winter, and to push yourself towards a clearer, progressive ARGUEMENT. Outlining, or at least making a list of points for each section or part, invariably helps. So too is keeping a list of keywords you find yourself repeatedly borrowing from other writers or inventing yourself.

Remember, too, that in the thesis proper, your reader wants to know from you very early on what your argument is; adumbrate or state the essence of that argument near the beginning. Don't wait to state it until it has developed over many pages. Readers eagerly want the view from the mountain you have climbed, not a long account that finally comes to "the conclusion." In many theses, the so-called conclusion would have far better been stated in the first five pages.

The order of the parts often does not reflect how the author worked through the thesis; the parts create the final status of an argument and what seems the most compelling order of its telling.

A prospectus describes a METHODOLOGY or CRITICAL APPROACH. For example, *what counts as "evidence" in this thesis, and what are the principles or criteria for interpreting this evidence?* Much criticism involves close reading of individual or paired texts. The evidence in these essays often treats different kinds of *patterns* – stylistic, generic, formal, thematic, or a combination of these. You should know something about the *tradition* or *genre* of the texts you are writing about. You should research their *history* and how they fit into the career of their author(s) and their cultural moment. If, for example, you are writing about Keats's Great Odes, you should read some of Shelley's, and Wordsworth's, and Mary Robinson's, and Gray's, and Milton's, and Horace's odes – you do not need to *write* about them, necessarily, but they should inform your thinking. You should also read the books and essays that helped define your field – in this case, say, Helen Vendler's *The Odes of John Keats* and Paul Fry's *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode*. Seek out critical works you see frequently cited by *other* critical works, and ask your advisor "What book or essay shaped how people today look at this work/author/period/genre/problem?"

Some theses relate texts directly or indirectly to political, social, or environmental issues. One of the great challenges and interests of such approaches is that they ask why literature and literary analysis *matter*, what its value is. *If it is relevant, to what, and why? If it is pleasurable, how does it achieve that magic?* The reader is eager to know why your thesis matters. If you fear disappointing or boring your reader, this can be a good spur.

A prospectus needs an annotated BIBLIOGRAPHY. List and describe your main texts and any other less central texts you feel are important. *Include germane journal articles and periodical essays, not just books.* You should also list and describe helpful books and articles that discuss your texts, authors, and genres in their historical context, or that set out the large framework (e.g., "reader response theory," "feminist theory," "genre theory," "environmental studies," "theology,") in which you plan to situate them. Finally, you need to find relevant books and articles that analyze the texts you are writing about in ways you hope to engage. You're joining a *conversation* with others about the texts you all have been examining, and you should position your own voice in relation to their voices. This approach can inform your brief summaries of critical texts as you annotate them in your bibliography.

Finally, a few miscellaneous points about theses and prospectuses both:

A prospectus does not need to have all the answers to its own questions. It is better to lay out issues and concerns you intend to explore in writing the thesis than to pretend to have already solved all the problems. There is no "right" way to write a prospectus, or a thesis: critical theses are as different from one another as novels, poems, or species. But there is, almost invariably, a "wrong way": delaying the writing. Write a draft part or section when you feel the inner pressure and excitement to do so. Don't delay. This is *your* thesis, and it belongs to you. You become the authority. You will learn to trust your own judgment and take charge of the writing process, even while listening to advice not only from your advisor, *but also from any faculty member or person who can give it*. You are not committed to do everything your prospectus says you plan to do: think of it as a serious hypothesis, a preliminary blueprint. And, to repeat: do not wait until you are ready to write; write *before* you seem ready, every day if possible. If you get lonely writing, find others to share work mutually. Talk to your friends, old professors and TFs, anyone who will listen. Start your day by thinking about your thesis, even if only for a little while. At the end of a day's work, *park downhill*, leave off somewhere you can pick up easily later.

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