Prospectus

The purpose of a prospectus is twofold. You need to have a prospectus approved by the department so that we can be assured that you have a sensible idea and are handling it in a sensible way, and give advice early on in the process. You need to have it in early October because by this time you need to have gone some way to making serious preliminary decisions. There are many ways of writing a prospectus, and we have some examples available for you to see. We suggest, however, that you bear the following things in mind as you play your own prospectus, and you can, if you wish, use them as a template. A prospectus does not have to be a fancy piece of writing; the most important thing is that it lay out a clear agenda for you to work with, one that you, your prospectus reader, and your advisors, all understand.

A prospectus needs to describe a SUBJECT or TOPIC. That is, it needs a good, preliminary title, preferably one that is descriptive and straightforward – fancy can come later – and it needs to give a clear sense of its scope and of the questions it asks. Scope largely means “the specific texts/bodies of texts to be covered,” and is very important. You need to find the right amount of material to deal with for your particular topic and approach: expansive enough that there is room for ideas to grow, but not so much that you cannot see the horizon so forget where you are going. This is a big early matter to discuss with your advisors. Not all theses are best framed as questions in practice, but they are useful to think with in planning. First, what kind of question are you asking? In classical rhetoric, the word “topic” refers to a list of questions that can be asked of any subject-matter: Who, What, When, How, Why, to What Effect? It may be interesting to think of your thesis, early on, as asking one or other of the questions introduced by these interrogatives.

A prospectus needs to describe a STRUCTURE. This partly means simply indicating that you plan to write an Introduction, Two (or perhaps Three) chapters, and a Conclusion, but it also involves working out how to distribute your ideas and texts across your study. Are you going to use the thesis structure to ask the same questions about different bodies of material? Or are you going to vary the questions in some way, so that the second (or third) chapter builds on the first in some ways. The whole of a thesis should be greater than the sum of its parts; you are not writing two junior essays but working towards a large structure. It’s worth thinking now about how to articulate your structure to help make that happen. Think about ways to break down your chapters into partly independent sections, on which you can work separately, both for ease of writing through the fall and winter, and to push yourself towards a clearer, step by step argument.

A prospectus needs to describe a METHODOLOGY or CRITICAL APPROACH. There are several ways to think about this, but a good one is to ask What counts as “evidence” in this thesis, and what are the rules or criteria for interpreting this evidence? Much English essay writing involves close, thematic reading of individual or paired texts. The evidence in these essays is often the evidence of different kinds of pattern – stylistic, generic, formal, thematic. But in a well-researched thesis, such evidence is generally part of a larger evidentiary structure. You will need to know something about the tradition or genre of the texts you are writing about. You should certainly research their history and how they fit into the career of their author/s and their cultural moment. Some theses relate texts directly or indirectly to political or social or environmental issues. One of the great challenges and interests of such approaches is that they push us
towards asking why literature, and literary analysis, \textit{matters}, what it is \textit{for}. Try to give some account of what evidence you are drawing upon and what your critical approach to that evidence is to be. That way, you will be in a position to use this part of your prospectus to sketch out an \textsc{argument}, although the shape of that may not be clear, and give a preliminary sense of the \textsc{stakes} of your project (the answer to the question, “Why does this matter?”)

A prospectus also needs an \textsc{annotated bibliography}. Clearly you must list and describe your main texts here, and any other less central texts you feel are important to your discussion. You should also list and describe some books or articles which discuss your texts, authors, genres, etc. in their historical context or set out a large framework (“\textsc{reader response theory},” “\textsc{feminist theory},” “\textsc{genre theory},” “\textsc{environmental studies},” “\textsc{theology},” etc. etc.) in which you plan to read them. Finally, you need to find relevant books and articles that analyze the texts you are writing about in ways you hope to learn from. Remember that scholarship on literary works is not just there to be \textit{mined} for interesting ideas, striking phrases, or even particularly unintelligent remarks you can put down. Think of yourself as joining a \textit{conversation} with others who have thought hard about the texts you are working on, and think how to position your own voice in relation to these others. This “\textsc{dialogic}” approach can usefully inform your brief summaries of these critical texts as you annotate your bibliography.

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

First, a prospectus does not need to have all the answers to its own questions. It is all better to lay out issues and concerns you intend to explore in writing the thesis than to pretend to have solved problems you know you have not. Second, there is no right way to write a prospectus, or a thesis: critical theses are as different from one another as novels, poems, species. Third, there probably \textit{is} a right way to write \textit{your} prospectus and thesis; your job is to find out what it is. Fourth, this really \textit{is} your thesis, it belongs to you and nobody else – sometimes, you may feel you belong to it – so you should learn to trust your own judgment and take charge of the writing process, while of course listening carefully to all the advice you can get. Fifth, you are not committed to do everything your prospectus says you will do: think of it as a serious hypothesis, a preliminary blueprint. Sixth: do not wait until you are ready to write, since you may well never feel you are; write \textit{before} you are ready, every day if possible. Seventh: if you get lonely writing, find others doing the same. Share work whenever you can and with whomever you can. Talk to your colleagues, old professors and TFs, anyone who will listen, if you wish to do so. Eighth and last: always start your day by thinking about your thesis, even if only for a little while. At the end of a day’s work \textit{park downhill}, leave off somewhere you can pick up easily later.

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