

Second written assignment in a two-quarter research project

THE RESEARCH PROSPECTUS

A “prospectus” is an incisive and revealing analytic summary of your research project, between ten to fifteen pages in length. It is a more detailed, more sophisticated, more focused version of your Preliminary Statement. The prospectus first states the question that your group will attempt to answer or explore and shows why it is an important/worthy question in the context of current knowledge and your own intellectual/social purposes. It then describes what you will do to answer or explore that question; explaining how and why each step fits in your analytic research design and will cumulate to produce the data or other information needed to serve your purposes. The prospectus concludes with a preview of your thesis or argument and a tentative outline of the paper that will result. An annotated bibliography of the most important source materials must be included.

The goal of a prospectus is to show clearly that (a) it is possible for you to carry out a substantial piece of research on this topic, (b) your research will answer or fully explore the question you have formulated, (c) the scope of the project is such that it can be completed within the time available to you. Obviously, you can develop a good prospectus only when you have actually done a significant share of the research involved for the project. You must go beyond a good idea to evaluate the sources you will use, the strategies you will employ with them, and the kinds and implications of the data you will develop from them. With regard to the library and on-line research you must be able to show specifically that the basic components you need for a logical analysis are available in certain key sources. The best way to do so is by actually drawing on some of them in your prospectus to illustrate how they will advance your argument. In the case of community activism, in addition to volunteering with a group, you must examine and assess the organization’s aims and actions in relation to the subject matter of political economy and social movements.

The prospectus is thus in part an intellectual justification for, and in part a mini-version of, your project. This means that your project should be conceptualized and refined during the fall quarter. Only then can the research tasks be implemented, the paper drafted and crafted provocatively and effectively, and the presentation organized, rehearsed, and delivered, during the winter quarter.

Your prospectus should have nine sections as described below and contain as many thoughts as you can muster. Many of the key assumptions and basic orientation of your final report will be in this document. Each section should be labeled. We are, of course, available to talk to you about developing your prospectus at any point in the process. Footnote your prospectus as you would a research paper.

I. TOPIC: State the general topic that your research will explore and give the dates and other boundaries that mark the scope of your investigation.

II. QUESTION OR THESIS: State your central question or thesis as succinctly as you can. Remember that the question or thesis sets the agenda for your entire project: it guides you into your subject, so its wording must in some way imply the range of issues you want to explore. Important: Contrary to popular belief, you do not need to have a thesis. A carefully developed and well-focused question is often a more interesting point of departure; and a clear thesis often emerges as your research deepens.

III. HYPOTHESES: Write a couple of paragraphs that explain the facts, hunches, observations, guesses, etc. on which you base your primary question or thesis. Important: Make distinctions among knowledge, facts, guesses, hunches, observations, etc. This will help you and your readers to know how different kinds of information relate in your mind.

IV. SECONDARY QUESTIONS: Write down all the secondary questions you will need to address in order to explore your thesis. Begin these questions with such words as who, what, when, where, why, and how. Write as many questions as you can think of. Don't censor your thoughts: no matter how crazy or far out your questions may seem, get everything out so you can see it on paper.

V. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE QUESTION/THESIS: Explain how your question relates to the major themes, issues, and questions raised by the scope of our program. Explain how your question or thesis will illuminate some of the issues we have read about, explored, and discussed so far in the program. These issues are suggested in the syllabus, in lectures and the readings, and in our winter quarter planning.

VI. OUTLINE. This section should be a preliminary outline for your paper. Think about sections II, III, IV, and V of your prospectus your guideline. The outline should tell the reader what you will do and how you will do it: what points you will demonstrate and how, what evidence you will provide and how you will use it. Don't feel obliged to use roman numerals and lettered sub-headings. It may help you to first write in a form that lets you think on paper and in which your thoughts can come out of your head as easily as possible and then arrange them a bit more formally in an organized and logical manner.

VII. RESEARCH STRATEGY. Identify the major steps you will need to undertake to complete your research. What is your methodology; why are you using it; how will you implement it? You will need to specify what data you will be looking for; e.g., library data, statistical data, interview data. You need to state as clearly as you can how you will be gathering that data. If you are developing a case study(ies), identify the cases and explain their selection. If you will need to gain access to specific document collections, make particular arrangements for travel out of town, or gain permission for doing research on human subjects as in a series of interviews or a survey, you need to specify what arrangement you have made to meet these difficulties.

VIII. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: List a few of the key articles and books from which your research will draw heavily, indicating their relationship to one another, how they will influence your theoretical framework and/or argument, and any differences you may have with their approaches.

IX. BIBLIOGRAPHY: List all the sources you have identified so far: one section for books, another for articles, another for internet sources; and yet another for other sources. Provide the full and proper bibliographic citation for each entry. Be sure to work with The Chicago Manual of Style. Provide a brief annotation for each source.

Finally, your faculty sponsor will read and critique your research prospectus as will at least two other research groups. Your Research Prospectus is due XXX [generally week IX of the first quarter].

Some General Principles and Specifications:

1. Demonstrate your ability/facility at interdisciplinary thinking and research. Your research should also reflect your ability to use a variety of data sources.
2. Provide an in-depth exploration and analysis of your thesis rather than a general survey of it.
3. Treat your thesis in historical perspective, and, where it makes sense, according to a particular historiographical methodology.
4. Define and specify your uses of constructs, concepts, and assumptions; use them consistently throughout your argument; clarify any modifications you make in your definitions, constructs, etc. as you go along.
5. Be as clear as possible about cause-and-effect relationships. Watch your sentence construction for unintended or implied causality.
6. Document all material and resources you consider with the full bibliographic citation so that you will be able to cite them appropriately in your paper. A brief annotation of each source will help you remember its contents and potential value to your research.
7. Give careful thought to the paper's title.
8. Invest yourself in this project and try to have some fun in doing it.