

The Prospectus

The prospectus is an important rite of passage in which the candidate makes the transition from being a student taking courses to becoming a researcher and historian in his/her own right. For this reason, the prospectus is normally the final requirement to be completed before the dissertation itself. Upon completing the prospectus and having it approved, the student achieves “All But Dissertation” (ABD) status and is officially admitted to candidacy for the Ph.D degree.

Because of its importance, the prospectus is intended to follow a significant and demanding period of preparation in consultation with the student’s adviser. In the prospectus the student is expected to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) explain the intellectual excitement and rationale of the dissertation that is expected to follow;
- 2) locate the proposed dissertation within the context of the existing literature in the field and define the ways in which the dissertation constitutes an original contribution to knowledge;
- 3) identify the archival collections and primary sources that will support the dissertation;
- 4) outline the essence of the argument that the dissertation is expected to make;
- 5) describe the research trajectory that the student plans to follow, with some indication of the time that the research can reasonably be expected to take;
- 6) demonstrate that the student has acquired the necessary historical knowledge of the subject and the specific research skills (linguistic or statistical, for example) necessary to bring a dissertation on the particular subject to completion.

The prospectus, then, is an extended scholarly essay -- usually of about 25-30 pages plus bibliography – in which the student presents the expected argument of the thesis, and supports it with the accepted scholarly conventions concerning notes and bibliography. It should be carefully argued and written in a professional manner. It is also worth keeping in mind that the dissertation prospectus will also serve as the basis of most grant proposals.

The Prospectus Committee

In consultation with his/her adviser, the student is expected to form a committee to assess the document, the feasibility of the proposed study, the probable scholarly contribution of the work, and his or her readiness to undertake the research project described. Normally the committee consists of three or four Yale faculty members familiar with the field within which the dissertation lies. The chair of the committee is the dissertation adviser, and at least one of the other members is expected to be a Program in the History of Science and Medicine faculty member. The other member(s) may be selected from the Program faculty or from other departments. In exceptional circumstances, and with the approval of the DGS, a member of the committee may be appointed from outside Yale. In

all cases, it is the student's responsibility to contact the faculty members and to ask them to serve on the committee.

The Prospectus Defense

Upon completion of the prospectus draft, the student should contact the committee members to set a date for the prospectus defense. The student should consult them well in advance of the date he/she would like the defense to occur. The defense itself is an academic discussion of approximately an hour in length in which the committee members ask questions, assess the strengths and weaknesses of the prospectus, and make suggestions of ways in which the project could be strengthened. At the end of the defense the committee members normally sign a form stating that the prospectus is satisfactory and that the student has been admitted to candidacy. It is the responsibility of the student to obtain the form from the Graduate Registrar and to bring it to the defense.

The committee may return the prospectus and ask that the student revise and improve it within a stated period of time. The members of the committee will be expected to specify the ways in which the prospectus needs to be revised and improved. The committee also has the option to fail the prospectus. In that exceptional case it will then be the responsibility of the Program Chair and DGS, in consultation with the adviser and faculty, to determine whether the student will be allowed to prepare a new prospectus on a different topic. Fortunately, such outcomes are rare.

By approving the prospectus, the committee declares that it deems the topic to be intellectually worthwhile and practically feasible. The student is then ready to begin the research for the dissertation itself. Although the prospectus is the basis for the dissertation, it is not a binding document and the student, like all researchers, is free to depart from it as the material that he or she finds demands. The prospectus is a statement of intention, not a contract.