



GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING A DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS

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The following guidelines are offered to faculty and students in the Department of Asian Studies in order to assist students in planning and preparing a prospectus for their dissertation and to create a common set of expectations among faculty advisors. The guidelines are not absolute and dissertation committees should work with students to develop additional or alternative elements suitable for specific projects. Significant deviations from these guidelines, however, should be discussed with the department's Graduate Advisor and Graduate Coordinator and communicated to a student in writing.

The effort leading up to a doctoral dissertation involves two basic steps, among others: **designing a research project** and **preparing a prospectus** for that project. In order to design a viable research project, you have to demarcate four elements clearly for yourself: (a) the object of study; (b) the material you will use to study that object; (c) the method you will use to “process” the material so that you generate new knowledge of your object of study; and (d) the specific goals you wish to attain in completing the project satisfactorily. It is essential to conceptualize your research project fully, before attempting to write a prospectus that will help you turn the project into a successful dissertation.

A dissertation prospectus is a practical plan of action. It should lay out in necessary detail what your intended object of study is, what your material is or will be, how you will handle the material, and what the goals of your study are or will be. Since a proposal deals with a process that is not yet complete, much of its exposition has to be in the future tense and in the language of intention (rather than accomplished task). But in formulating such a plan, a dissertation prospectus has to go beyond the bare bones of the four elements of the designing a research project described above. That is, it has to regroup and convert the above-mentioned elements into the “actionable” components of a practical plan. Such a plan-document usually has the following parts:

(1) **Statement and Significance of Topic:** What is your object of study, and what, in summary, do you expect to say or demonstrate about it, or do with it? What are the goals of your study? Why is it important to study this object, and in what scholarly field is it located? What are its social, cultural, historical, political, intellectual, and other contexts, and what

impact do you expect your particular study to have on our understanding of this object and its field?

(2) Review of Scholarship: Who has studied this object earlier, and what have they said about it? What is the existing scholarship on related phenomena, and in the field at large, that is connected or relevant to your topic? Given this current scholarship, what will make your study new, unique, and useful, and hence “an original contribution to knowledge”?

(3) Materials and Method: What materials will you use to study your chosen object? What is their scope, either in terms of time period, regional focus, comparative range, etc. What will be your disciplinary orientation, and how will you approach the object? How will your materials and methods be adequate to your object of study, and how will they help you to attain your stated goals?

(4) Outline of Dissertation: How will your thesis or dissertation be organized, and what will each part or chapter contain? What will its anticipated length be?

(5) Calendar: What is your schedule for each phase of the research and writing on this project? Does your plan include time doing research in the field or archives?

(6) Select Bibliography: What books, articles, and other materials are likely to feature most prominently in your research and writing on this project?

It is usually best to divide your proposal into these sections with headings; and to maintain the overall order outlined above. The first four sections of the proposal will constitute its bulk; the fifth section (Calendar) may be simply a short list of phases and dates; the sixth section (Select Bibliography) will follow the bibliographic style used in your subfield.

Topic

This section of the proposal should open with an extended statement of your topic. It should be followed by a circumspect formulation of the topic’s multi-level significance. Note that the “subject” of a research project is a broad and general definition of its subject-matter or content, whereas its “topic” is much narrower and more specific. Moreover, a topic, as identified in a project-title or short statement, usually also indicates an argument or approach or critical position. Thus, to say that your dissertation is about “representations of women in Pakistan” is to identify its general subject; to say that your study is “an ideological analysis of the representations of women in Urdu novels, short stories, and films in Pakistan from 1950 to 2000,” is to specify your topic precisely, including your disciplinary approach, material, and linguistic, historical, literary, and cinematic contexts.

Review of Scholarship

For a dissertation prospectus, a modest account of the place of your proposed work within your intended field and discipline will suffice. A longer review of the orientations and contributions of your research to a field typically appears early in a dissertation. It is also the first thing publishers ask to be cut! Students should work with their committees to determine the style and length of the literature review appropriate for their dissertation. Increasingly, shorter, more pointed reviews that might serve without much change for a published work are acceptable for the dissertation itself. A “literature review” or “review of literature in the field,” your review is not just a listing of the articles, books, and other material that you have found on library and other catalogs. It is a qualitative analysis of what has actually been recorded, analyzed, thought, written, debated, and theorized about in relation to your topic. Ideally, your literature review will enable you to fine-tune your topic, indicate what material you need to use, what method to adopt, and what general and specific goals to pursue in your study. Most importantly, your literature review will provide you with the strongest justification of your research project, its “what,” “why,” and “how.” At this point, however, it is a “prospective” review, i.e. how you anticipate your research will fit in a broader scholarly history.

Materials and Methods

This section should provide a justification for your choice of materials, especially your “primary” materials: which texts will you focus on, what editions will you use, what specialized or rare materials will you rely on, where and how will you obtain them, what kinds of interpretive problems do your materials pose, to what extent will you depend on translations, what languages will you read in the original, etc. It should also provide an account of your method(s), including your assumptions and working principles, your theoretical and critical position(s), your particular procedures, etc. It should also show how your preferred method(s) will fit in with your topic, your materials, and your stated goals.

Chapter Outline

This portion of your proposal should provide a clear plan for the organization of your thesis or dissertation. It should list all anticipated divisions of the work (Preface, Chapters, Illustrations, Bibliography, etc.); and, for each of these divisions, it should provide a compact but specific description of what it will cover and how it will cover that material. Especially for each of the chapters, you will need to provide a short paragraph describing its content and its

basic argument, a description of your general line of reasoning and how it helps demonstrate your point. The organization of your chapters should follow some kind of logical progression that moves forward the bigger claims you are making in the dissertation. This may seem premature and things will change, of course, but your chapter outline will serve as the ground-plan for your actual writing, once your proposal has been approved, and hence should be as reliable and realistic as possible.

Calendar

You should include a workable calendar for your dissertation project. To prepare such a calendar, work back in time from your anticipated graduation date and the College deadlines for initial submission, oral defense, and final submission of the completed dissertation. If you have workable drafts of any chapters from seminar or conference papers, etc., you should include that information in this section.

Select Bibliography

The Bibliography you attach to your dissertation prospectus will be a Select Bibliography. It should consist only of those materials which you have surveyed and evaluated as being the most relevant and closely connected to your topic, and which will provide the points of reference at the start of your writing. This bibliography should relate to the literature review.

Size and Format of the Prospectus

Dissertation prospectuses should be prepared and circulated in standard scholarly format: 1 or 1.25-inch margins on all sides, 12-point type, double spacing throughout, first lines of paragraphs indented, etc. (A good model to follow is the model for a scholarly paper recommended by the Modern Language Association of America; see www.mla.org.) There should be no footnotes or endnotes in proposals; use the MLA or the Chicago Manual of Style parenthetical citation system, if necessary, keying it to the Select Bibliography. The bibliography should be prepared in a standard format; follow one of the standard styles consistently throughout the proposal (MLA, Chicago Manual, APA, etc.)

A dissertation prospectus in Asian Studies is expected to be 10-15 pages in length. Roughly, the statement and significance of the topic often needs 3-4 pages; the literature review may fill 2-3 pages; the discussion of material and methods is likely to need 3-5 pages; the chapter outline, probably 3-4 pages; and the calendar and bibliography, around 2 pages.