

WRITING THE HUMANITIES DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS

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Workshop Agenda

- What is a Prospectus?
- Organization Strategies
- Literature Review
- Crafting Your Argument
- Chapter Breakdowns
- Writing the Introduction



What Am I Even Doing?!

Broadly speaking, the dissertation prospectus does the following:

- Sells your committee on the *value* and *feasibility* of your project, makes them feel comfortable sending you off to do it
- Demonstrates your knowledge of subject matter and related fields (Literature Review)
- Situates your work within active scholarly debate
- Educates your readers about your topic
- Sets the parameters for your oral exam



Prospectus Components

- Introduction
- Literature Review OR Historiography
- Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology*
- Argument
- Chapter Breakdowns
- Description or Preliminary Analysis of Primary Sources
- Timeline for Completion*
- References OR Working Bibliography



Team Management

- Dissertation Committee
 - Forming
 - Managing
- Family and Friends
 - Setting Expectations
 - Making Time
- Child Care



File & Bibliography Management



Work Management

Pick a workspace that works for you

- May not be the same everyday or for every task
- Be HONEST with yourself about where you work best
- Feel free to change it up if you're not being productive

Break prospectus components into “chunks” of work

- Researching/Reading Time
- Note-taking & Outlining Time
- Writing, Drafting and Revision Time

Create a weekly workflow

- Be reasonable with your goals rather than aspirational
- Tie goals to rewards to motivate yourself
- Consider a workflow system like KanbanFlow or Todoist



Organizing Your Writing

“First you make a mess, and then you clean it up!”—Joan Bolker, *Write Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*

- **Zero Draft:** freewrites or thought pieces
- **Outline:** Simple or complex, sketch out the first draft
- **First Draft:** Get the ideas down AKA “the vomit draft”
- **Second Draft:** Revise structure, focusing on argument, evidence, transitions and big-picture claims.
- **Third Draft:** Editing your prose. Clarify sentences, remove passive voice, hone your word choice.
- **Final Draft:** Proofreading for grammar, spelling and format.



Annotating Sources: Efficient Reading

Initial Skim

- Read the introduction (book) or abstract (article)
- Look over table of contents and index (book) or section headings (article)
- Read the conclusion (book) or final section (article)

Second Pass

- Identify the argument and/or research questions
- Determine what is most useful to your project



Annotating Sources: Taking Notes Three Ways

Answer Questions

- Thesis of book/article?
- Most interesting ideas?
- Angles or issues overlooked in work? (My response is...)
- Usefulness of work to my project?

Visual Annotation

- Maps out questions above in visual format

Flashcards

- Economy of space forces you to get to the point



Approaching the Lit Review

- The literature review should contain a critical summary of the previous work that has been done on your topic and/or related fields
- Doesn't merely summarize previous research on your topic, but tries to tell a story about it and indicate your intervention
- The lit review is supposed to help identify your niche in a given field or topic. Is your work...
 - Addressing a gap in previous research? (common)
 - Building on previous research? (common)
 - Correcting previous research? (uncommon)



Organizing the Lit Review

BEFORE you even begin drafting the Lit Review...

- Annotate your sources
- Synthesize them with one another. What are the major issues or questions this archive addresses?
- Critique them. What don't you agree with and why?
- Compare them to one another. Who is talking to who? What are the “camps”? Where do you stand?



Visualizing Your Lit Review

We often recommend working with a Venn diagram in order to get your arms around the lit review. Here's the process:

1. Identify 3 major concepts/ideas that organize your project. (ie. Diaspora, Orientalism, Queer Relationality)
2. Draw out your Venn diagram, label each of the three circles with one of your organizing concepts/ideas.
3. In each concept/idea circle, write the names of three key critics and/or theorists whose works is central to your thinking about that concept/idea.
4. Repeat #3, but look at the linked loops between concept/idea circles. (ie. Whose work deals with Diaspora & Orientalism, or Orientalism & Queer Relationship, Diaspora & Queer Relationality)



Lit Review Organization Type

Topical (most common)

- Breaks up lit review into a number of subfields, subject areas, or approaches for individual analysis

Distant-to-Close

- Breaks up lit review into groups of studies according to their relevance to your topic
- Begins with most general, narrowing down to most relevant

Chronological

- Breaks up lit review according to chronological developments in the field.
- Useful for fields marked by developments in thinking over time

Seminal Study

- Starts with focused engagement and analysis of 1-2 key studies relevant to your project



What To Do When You See Your Argument During the Lit Review

- Don't panic. This is evidence that your project is interesting and it matters. Also, be grateful that it happened now and not before you sit down to write a chapter.
- Draw up a critical inventory of what the source is saying and put that alongside what you're saying (or what you think you're saying). There will be differences. Trust me.
- Think of the critic as your ally and not your enemy. They can help you avoid preliminary work that you might have had to do otherwise, freeing you up to get to the good stuff.



Crafting the Argument

- The LIT REVIEW helps you figure out the state of your field so that you can know the type of contribution you're making (gap in research, extension of research, correction to previous research).
- However, this is NOT your argument. Rather it is what leads you to your argument, which articulates the significance of your study to the fields mentioned in your lit review.
- EXAMPLE
 - GAP: No one has explored the relevance of homosexuality to the aesthetics and politics of Claude McKay.
 - TOPIC: The influence same-sex desire bears on McKay's writing and political thought.
 - ARGUMENT: Homosexuality, as a mode of desire and relationality, shaped the representation of diaspora and narrative structure of McKay's *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*.



What is the Chapter Breakdown?

- At its most basic, the chapter breakdown provides a PLAN for the dissertation that includes summaries of its major components: the introduction, individual chapters (usually 3-4), and your conclusion.
- The chapter breakdown is NOT a contract that you'll have to follow explicitly when you sit down to write the dissertation
- The shape that the individual chapter summaries take is largely to be determined by your committee (especially the chair!). It is wise and good to consult with them about it.



Types of Chapter Breakdown

Beyond the basic structure of Intro, Chapters 1-4, Conclusion, the dissertation chapters can be broken down along the following lines:

- Subject-based (Object focus)
- Subject-based (Producer focus)
- Thematic
- Chronological
- Combination of Thematic/Chronological



Elements of a Chapter Breakdown

- TOPIC of each chapter
- RELATIONSHIP of each chapter to your dissertation
- RESEARCH QUESTIONS that each chapter addresses and how your object answer those questions
- PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS that gives committee a sense of what you'll be using and how you'll be using it
- THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK indicating you methodology and approach to these primary sources



Writing the Introduction

- Previews the argument of the dissertation. (Get to this quick!)
- Provides a road map of the dissertation, explaining where the project is going, how it's going to get there and why that journey matters. (Keep this simple and top-line. You'll have room for complexity later.)
- Briefs your reader on the basic info they need to know:
 - Topic of your dissertation
 - Key names, dates, places, etc.
 - Definitions of any key words or field-specific jargon that are **ESSENTIAL** to the dissertation
 - Key theoretical frameworks or schools of thought
 - Context of your argument (preview of lit review)



Starting the Introduction

- Vignette or Anecdotal lede
- Pithy quote that frames the tensions of your project
- Statistic that illuminates the issue you're interested in
- Research question
- Challenge to current research or critical consensus about a topic
- Surprising finding
- (Short) close reading



Wrapping Things Up

KEY POINTS

- Maintain contact with your committee, especially the chair, since they will determine the expectations and form of your prospectus
- Start with the Literature Review. It makes things easier.
- Take notes on EVERYTHING. You will forget it if you don't. Just do it. Seriously.
- Continuously work on your argument and don't avoid it. It's ok if it changes.
- NEVER. STOP. WRITING. Writing is like a muscle, the more you work it, the easier it is and the stronger your writing gets. If you're stuck, do a free write or a thought piece.



Wrapping Things Up

- Feeling stuck? Schedule an appointment with one of the writing consultants at the Graduate Writing Center.
<http://gwc.gsrc.ucla.edu>
- Need motivation and guidance over the summer? Consider joining our Humanities Dissertation Prospectus Bootcamp during Summer Session A. It's FREE!

