

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

DEVELOPING A PROSPECTUS FOR A MASTER'S THESIS

The purpose of a thesis prospectus is to provide the student's thesis committee members with a clear and concise description of the proposed study, so they may determine the soundness of preparation and conceptualization of the planned study. Specifically, the introduction to the prospectus should identify clearly the specific research problem being addressed. In essence, the prospectus represents a type of "contract" with the committee regarding the nature and scope of the study, and once the committee has approved it, the student is responsible for fulfilling that agreement.

Accordingly, the prospectus is not merely a literature review, nor is it the first chapter of the completed study. It is, as the name implies, a suggested plan for the study, which directly solicits the advice, evaluation, and approval of the committee members. Obviously, the more developed the prospectus, the more enlightened the committee members will be about the potential of the planned study and the more helpful in directing the master's candidate they can be, especially during the prospectus meeting.

Though the nature of each study will dictate certain specifics, which may be unique, a good prospectus will necessarily contain several, common components. In general, these components may be included within four conceptual areas: (1) a rationale, (2) a review of relevant scholarship, (3) a method to be employed, and (4) an overall organizational plan.

I. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Traditionally, academia has required scholars to justify their scholarship. To posit only that something has never been done is insufficient reason for devoting study to it now. Likewise, just

because existing scholarship already has an established position does not mean that a problem cannot be re-examined. What it does mean is that one must provide some rationale for why it is important to scholars that the proposed study be completed.

Consequently, adequate justification for such a study should minimally answer two questions.

1. What is the purpose or set of purposes for the study, i.e., what should be accomplished by its completion?
2. Why is this purpose significant? For example, what will we learn that we do not already know? What misconceptions should it correct? What original insight will it provide, given the nature of this study?

The assumption here is that adequate justification for any study should be primarily grounded in the body of existing scholarship and addressed to all interested scholars. The prospectus may also provide pragmatic or practical applications for the research.

II. REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP RELEVANT TO THE PROPOSED STUDY

Scholarly research does not occur in a void. Though the outcome of such study aims to be original and important, its foundation and rationale derives from previous scholarly efforts. Responsible scholarship acknowledges the body of work to which it is indebted and attempts to articulate its outcome in terms that respond to that scholarship. In other words, responsible scholarship explains how it is contributing to existing knowledge on the subject or problem.

Accordingly, the prospectus must provide evidence that sufficient preliminary research has been completed, as a foundation both for justifying the study and for defining it. To do so, the prospectus minimally includes three parts:

1. A well-developed review or summary of existing scholarship,
2. A description of the specific scholarly issues or problems addressed by the study,

3. An exhaustive, working bibliography in proper form (see section below).

III. METHOD TO BE EMPLOYED IN THE STUDY

This portion of the prospectus is more specifically defined by the nature of the study. Research projects in social scientific areas of the discipline use different methods and objects of study than research projects in humanistic or critical areas of the discipline. Regardless, the method or critical perspective must be identified, explained, or otherwise developed, along with providing justification for selecting that particular method or perspective. Again, the assumption is that adequate justification explains how the method or perspective is especially appropriate for addressing the problems of the study, rather than merely finding a study that can use one's favorite method or perspective.

Furthermore, in discussing the research method, some account needs to be given of what specific text(s), primary resources, experimental data are to be employed in the study. If a selection, rather than a whole, is to be used, then some explanation of the criteria used in that selection should be provided. If a specific research tool is implied or required, e.g., a foreign language or statistics, then a description of how that tool has been (or will be) acquired should be included.

Finally, any reference materials or resources or advisory assistance external to the department, but necessary to the proposed study, should be acknowledged, along with an explanation of how those external sources will be accessed.

IV. THE PLAN OF THE STUDY

The last section of the prospectus should provide an overall outline of the study, as it is projected. Typically, this outline is provided as a chapter-by-chapter plan. To be helpful, the plan should be detailed sufficiently to give committee members an idea of where pieces of the study fit into the whole, as well as how the study should develop. Any subsections, appendices, or other parts to be included should be identified. Obviously, the more detailed the plan can be at this point, the more likely potential problems can be identified and solved before the study itself is in progress.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Attached to the prospectus is the bibliography. Its purpose is to provide a summary of the materials identified as pertinent to the proposed study. In constructing the bibliography, it may be useful to separate materials into subcategories, such as primary and secondary materials or reference materials and textual materials. The bibliography should be constructed in accordance with the style manual chosen for the study, *The MLA Style Manual*, *APA Style Manual*, or *The Chicago Press Manual of Style*. Review of the Graduate School's guidelines for theses and dissertations is also encouraged. The bibliography of a prospectus should be complete; it serves to corroborate other more direct evidence that the study is worthwhile and that the student has prepared sufficiently to complete the study.

Effective 1999