

What is a Prospectus?
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People may have different understandings, but in my opinion a prospectus should accomplish two tasks:

- 1) Justify why writing a dissertation on the proposed topic/question is a good idea (in terms of being able to contribute to knowledge and be recognized by the discipline as a contribution).
- 2) Provide a preliminary plan of how you will answer the question(s) of interest that demonstrates the feasibility of the proposed project.

Both aspects are equally important. Important questions with no feasible way of conducting an analysis results in a failed dissertation. Feasible projects on questions that no one cares about results in a dissertation that will produce bad outcomes for your career.

The prospectus should address several questions and issues. The precise order is not overly important, but the document should answer most of the questions discussed below. That said, the questions I pose are representative of the types of things that should be addressed in the prospectus. Do not simply provide an answer to every question I pose as some of the questions may not be relevant. More important is to think about the larger point that I am highlighting about what the prospectus should accomplish and address that concern in some fashion (if appropriate).

1. Introduction:

All dissertations answer some variant of the question:

Why (or How) does Y depend on X?

And the introduction should make it clear not only what this question is, but also why it is a good and feasible question to study. Note that most dissertations actually ask a series of closely related questions – one in each chapter/paper – that are all related to the fundamental question of the thesis. The introduction should also explicate the connections between the questions your dissertation is going to ask (and answer) and is important for providing an overview of what you hope to accomplish.

What is the question?

To justify writing a dissertation you need to answer two closely-related questions: 1) why do you care about the answer, and 2) why should others care? If you do not care about the answer then it may be hard to pursue the question to completion. There should be something that interests and motivates you personally in the question you are asking as this is going to provide a source of motivation when the going inevitably gets tough. While it is important to

be personally invested in a question, that is not a sufficient condition for defining a good question. It must be the case that others will also be interested in the answer. I do two things to check external interest. First, can I pose the question in a way that my grandmother would find plausibly interesting or important. Not every question rises to this level, but if you cannot frame your question in way that would attract the interest of non-experts then I would think really hard about pursuing the question as it may be a sign that the question is so narrow or nuanced that its appeal will be limited. The more accessible the question is, the more impactful the dissertation is likely to be.

The second question you need to answer is: how does asking and presumably answering the proposed question contribute to the extant literature? Every paper has to be able to explicitly identify the contribution(s) of the paper in the introduction, so if there are no contributions that is a warning sign. Readers need to know why more work needs to be done. If the literature has already answered the question then why write the dissertation? Simply replicating existing findings is an important part of normal science, but it will also put a hard ceiling on the contribution given disciplinary norms that currently exist. *Independent of the results, why is your dissertation going to be novel.* You have to be able to justify the contribution independent of the results because you do not know what you are going to find, and if the justification is in terms of the results then that exemplifies the “file-drawer” problem associated with bad science where results are judged only on the basis of their results – risking spurious conclusions. In justifying the novelty/contribution, the following are often invoked: new data, new measures, new theory, new question, new identification/research design.

Relevant self-checks include:

- What is the big question you are interested in answering and which issues in political science are implicated in your proposed inquiry? If you were to talk to a non-political scientist, how would you describe what you are working on in generalist terms?
- Why is this an important question to study? What is at stake? How will your answers affect our understanding of politics and the study of political science?
- What do you hope to learn? If everything goes according to plan (which it will not), what will your dissertation show?
- What will your dissertation contribute to the discipline? What are the holes in our current understanding that your dissertation will partially fill? What new knowledge will be provided by the dissertation?

2. Literature Review: [This can be interwoven throughout the document or its own section.]

What literatures are relevant for your dissertation and how will your proposed dissertation contribute to what is already out there? What has recent related work found? What has recent work done in terms of the scope and method of analysis? Are there related literatures that are relevant and underrecognized that you can draw upon in your research? What are the limitations of the existing work? What opportunities do you see that you can contribute to?

The overall goal is to sketch the existing landscape in such a way so as to highlight how your research will contribute to shortcomings and unresolved issues. In so doing, it may be helpful to pay particular attention to how your dissertation will relate to the extant literature in terms of: theoretical development (how do your ideas compare to the existing ideas? Are you simply relying on existing theories or are you developing new ones?), measurement and description (are there issues with measurement and description that you are planning to address), and research design (how does existing work study the concepts of interest and are there potential issues with that?). The more innovations/improvements the better and you need at least one.

I do NOT want a list of everything that was ever written on the subject. I DO want you to know what the discipline is currently doing (if anything) on the topic and some sense of how the discipline's thinking on the topic has evolved. The latter is important for highlighting difficulties in the study of the proposed topic. For example, what concerns have shaped the development of scholarship on the proposed topic? You should be able to easily tie your proposed research into scholarship that is being published in the Top 3 or by top university presses because this is one crude metric of the extent to which the discipline is receptive to work on the area. That said, sometimes the lack of work indicates the difficulty of the topic rather than the importance of the topic to political scientists so the extent to which work is being done on a topic is only an approximate measure of the potential importance of the topic. (If you are thinking about a question for which there is no existing work this is a very big red flag.)

3. Proposed Chapters/Papers

After posing your question and sketching how the question and dissertation relates to the extant literature to help identify and justify the contribution of the dissertation, the next portion of the prospectus is a more detailed plan (or sketch of a plan) describing what each part of the analysis will be. This does not need to be a final plan as things will inevitably change in terms of specifications, etc., but it should be sufficiently detailed so we can evaluate the proposed research design to ensure that the analysis is

You can either try to answer the overall question posed in the introduction via a series of closely connected investigations that build upon one another in an effort to triangulate towards a solution using different approaches (e.g., Chapter 1 intro, Chapter 2 Theory, Chapter 3 Measurement and Description of big X and big Y, Chapter 4 statistical analysis, Chapter 5 case study, Chapter 6 conclusion), or else it can consist of 3 closely related papers that can exist individually.

The “book” dissertation gives you slightly more freedom in my opinion because it presents the argument in a cumulative fashion and you can therefore use different parts of the dissertation to compensate for shortcomings in the analysis through the use of multiple investigations, research designs, and approaches (e.g., complement a statistical analysis with a detailed case studies to provide a deep dive).

A “3 paper” dissertation is more difficult to execute well – even if you may think it is shorter – because it requires writing three stand alone papers. Because they are papers, each paper has to be able to stand alone and you cannot address issues in one paper by relying on the analysis in another. Whereas book reviewers will make an assessment on the totality of the contribution in every chapter, paper reviewers make an assessment based on what is contained in that particular paper. Thus, the paper has to be self-contained and concisely written.

Regardless of the path taken, another essential element of a prospectus is how you plan to answer the larger question you propose. This involves breaking the larger question into a series of questions that can be answerable in discrete chapters/papers and justifying why those are the right questions in addition to discussing the linkages between them.

Thus, a prospectus must propose a plan for how you will break down the larger question into a series of discrete answerable tasks – these are the papers/chapters of the dissertation. These chapters/papers involve questions and issues that are essential for addressing the question the dissertation hopes to answer. There are in infinite number of possibilities here, including:

- Theory: A new theoretical account of the relationship that can provide new testable hypothesis. Especially if the theory requires a great deal of new explication (e.g., a formal theory) and it is a new conceptualization of the relationship this effort can become an entire paper/chapter.
- Data: The collection of new data to measure, describe and characterize an important concept in new ways that can overcome the limitations of existing ways of measuring the concept. This can include conducting carefully selected case studies and/or interviews to provide more nuanced information about the relationships of interest. Hopefully to complement or deeper the ability to interpret other analyses.
- Research Design: Looking at the relationship of interest in another way -- a different unit of analysis, a different time period, a different approach/method, etc. This shouldn't just be a robustness exercise. How does the analysis contribute to our understanding? This could involve looking at an alternative dependent variable, or using a different analysis to rule out an alternative theoretical explanation (e.g., alternative independent variable).

When you get into the nuts-and-bolts part of the dissertation in this part of the prospectus I prefer to see what your action plan for each proposed chapter/paper. For each chapter/paper it is good to answer the following in the write-up you provide.

- How will this chapter/paper contribute to the larger dissertation?
- What is the motivating question for this chapter/paper?
- Why is answering that motivating question important in terms of the substance of what you hope to find, but also in terms of contributing to the discipline?
- What are your theoretical expectations?
- What data are you going to need (if any) -- does this data exist or do you need to collect it?
- How are you going to measure the concepts of interest and how do you plan to identify the relationship (i.e., what is the source of variation, research design, and estimation strategy)? What are the problems and limitations that you anticipate in terms of what you are going to be able to show and interpret? What are your thoughts for overcoming those limitations?