

A Guide to Writing a Prospectus for a Historical Research Project

What is a prospectus?

- Writing a prospectus is essentially an exercise in following the directions on the application itself and answering the questions.
- A successful prospectus:
 - demonstrates that there is a compelling *historical* and *historiographical* significance of your project;
 - shows that you have designed a feasible project in terms of its size, scope, and significance;
 - illustrates that you have a clear idea of the archival material that you wish to review and the contribution that material will make to your project;
 - provides a logistically possible research agenda, given constraints in both time and budget.

Prospectus Format

I. Your Research Question

- What specific, clearly defined topic are you investigating?
- What is its significance?

II. Background

- What do historians know about this topic already? How will you orient someone who isn't familiar with your topic? *Tip: Expect your reader to be intelligent and historically informed, but not to know the details of your specific topic.*
- What interpretations have different historians previously offered? *Tip: Provide a few key names either in your prose or in parenthetical citations in order to orient your reader in the literature.*
- What is the place of this specific topic in a wider field?

III. Intervention in the Secondary Literature

- In what ways are you adding to or disagreeing with the existing scholarship? Is your topic understudied? Are previous interpretations wrong? Have you discovered something new that will change the story? *Tip: The more specific you can be about the debates in which you are intervening and your contribution, the more compelling your case for research will be.*
- Why is it important to make this intervention? Why should other historians care? *Tip: Think about debates outside of your specific topic and into a wider field/audience.*

IV. The Archives You Plan to Access

- What *specific* sources/collections exist that will help you answer your research questions (i.e., name the archive and the collection!)? Where are they located? How much material do they contain? *Tip: Here is where the research librarians, online finding aids, and emailing archivists directly can be incredibly helpful.*
- Do you know the languages necessary to read your archival sources? Do your sources require any other kind of 'skills' (e.g., familiarity with quantitative methods)?
- *How* exactly will these sources help you to answer your research question?
- Why is it insufficient to research your topic using resources at Columbia? *Tip: Many collections of primary sources are available in printed copies, digitized formats, on microfilm, or through Borrow Direct or Interlibrary Loan. Make sure you can justify the need to travel abroad to complete your research!*

V. Timeline and Logistical Challenges

- Where are your archives located? Are they open at the time you plan to visit? *Tip: Archives in certain countries are not open in August!*
- Have you contacted the archivists? *Tip: In addition to providing practical guidance, archivists often can direct you to sources that you may not have found on your own.*
- Are you able to access the archives? Will you need to make an appointment in advance or provide them with documentation (e.g., a letter of introduction and a CV)?
- In what order do you plan to visit the different archives? How do you plan to organize your time and travel over the summer?
- Are there any particular problems you anticipate? How will you solve them?

VI. Bibliography

- Please follow appropriate Chicago Manual of Style formatting. For instructions on proper citation format see the Chicago Manual of Style Online (available via CLIO) or the Purdue Owl <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/01/>

Some Useful Language for Signposting

- For stating your research question:
 - My project proposes/seeks to study ... in order to show/illustrate/demonstrate/alter/etc...
 - I explore/chart/examine/study...in order to...
 - I seek to [understand/argue/etc]..., which will illustrate...
- Stating Hypotheses: (i.e., what you think, but need to look at the sources to argue effectively)
 - I tentatively argue/assert/claim....
 - I suggest/posit/hypothesize...
 - It seems likely that...
- To put your work in conversation existing scholarship:
 - While [historian] argues/suggests ..., my project/I...
 - On the contrary, instead, unlike, similarly, rather...
 - Moving beyond/past...
 - Contributing to the debate...
 - Building/Drawing on the work/scholarship of...
- Conceptual relationships:
 - in order to
 - because, since
 - therefore, thus
 - however, but
 - although, while

Additional Resources

- The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/>
- Harvard Guides to Writing in the Disciplines: <http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/brief-guides-writing-disciplines>
- Columbia Writing Center: <https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center>
- Barnard Writing Center: <https://writing.barnard.edu>
- Friends, Advisors, and Graduate Assistant Noelle Turtur (nt2434@columbia.edu)