**History Department guidelines for preparing a dissertation prospectus**

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These guidelines are meant to help doctoral students understand the general expectations for a History dissertation prospectus. Each student should work closely with their advisor to craft a prospectus that will meet the particular requirements for the student’s research and their advisor’s and committee members’ expectations.

A dissertation prospectus has two main purposes:

1. To inform the candidate’s faculty committee about what the student plans to research and how they will go about it, so the committee can offer critical feedback and advice early in the process.
2. To provide a clear plan for the student to complete their dissertation in an appropriate amount of time, within two or three years after the prospectus is approved.

A dissertation prospectus also provides a template for grant and fellowship applications. It gives a student practice in writing persuasively about their own ideas and vision for a project. The prospectus is a planning document, not a commitment set in stone or a binding contract. It should establish guideposts that will help the student stay on track to complete the work they propose within a reasonable time – generally, within two or three years after the prospectus defense.

Content of the prospectus

A History PhD prospectus typically includes five sections:

1. An introduction that explains the dissertation’s intended subject, time period, significance, and main research question.
2. A brief summary of the most relevant historiography, to situate the student’s research in relation to the work of leading scholars and key debates in relevant fields. This section should also refer to scholarship in other fields that informs your approach, and explain what your research will contribute to scholarly understanding.
3. A brief description of the central primary sources that will be essential for the dissertation, where they are located, and the methods you will use to analyze them.
4. A preliminary outline of chapter titles with brief content summaries.
5. A working bibliography that lists primary and secondary sources in separate sections that the student has already consulted or plans to use in their research.

In addition, include a timeline for visiting archives or other stages of the research, a schedule for completing chapters, and a list of funding sources to which you plan to apply. A methodology section is recommended for projects that will include methods of data gathering, analysis, or representation beyond archival research and writing.

Length

The main textual portion of the prospectus (introduction, historiography, sources, methods, and chapter outline) should be 10-12 pages long (double spaced), or more if needed.

The working bibliography can be any length. Here, straightforward organization is most important. In addition to secondary sources, include a section on primary sources that lists the archives and specific collections you plan to use as well as key published primary sources. At the prospectus defense, you should have a good handle on which sources are crucial for your research and be familiar with the relevant archival finding aids, so that you have a good sense of how rich or thin the materials are for your purposes. If you will be doing field research, such as conducting interviews or visiting study sites, try to estimate the time required for that work. (Note that interviews may require review and approval by UMaine’s Institutional Review Board [IRB].)

Prospectus review and defense

Discuss your plans for the prospectus with your advisor or co-advisors. Have them review a draft before you schedule the prospectus defense (finding a convenient time and place for the defense is the student’s responsibility). As in all other parts of the process, the student should work closely with their supervisor(s) to ensure that the prospectus is ready for committee discussion. Students and advisors are encouraged to discuss whether to invite non-committee members to the defense. This is not required, nor is it usually done, but it is an option.

The prospectus defense is not a test, but an opportunity for the student to respond to questions and suggestions about their research and for committee to give the student useful feedback. It is also an important moment for members of the committee to hear one another’s perspective on the proposed research. All members of the student’s core committee should attend the defense. Attendance by other faculty is not required, as the full committee may not yet be constituted.

The defense itself is fairly simple. The student usually begins by giving a presentation summarizing the prospectus (no more than 10 minutes), which may include a PowerPoint presentation if appropriate. After that presentation, the committee will take turns asking questions about the aspects of the prospectus that they would like to hear more about. The goal is for all involved to take part in a frank and productive discussion.

To give the committee ample time to read the prospectus, the student and their supervisor(s) should agree on a draft that is ready for distribution at least two weeks before the defense. It is the student’s responsibility to poll the committee to find a mutually agreeable time for the defense, and to make sure all committee members receive the prospectus by the agreed deadline. The student and advisor are encouraged to discuss whether to invite non-committee members to the public defense.

Once a doctoral student successfully defends their prospectus, they become a dissertator (ABD, all but dissertation). At that point they need enroll for just one thesis credit per semester. If they fail the defense, the committee will provide feedback for what needs to be improved and set a deadline for resubmission. The process should not reach this point, however, if the student works closely with their advisor and committee members leading up to the defense.