

RPOS 496z Great Ideas in Political Science Guidelines for Preparing the Prospectus

A prospectus basically summarizes your plan for researching and writing your senior thesis (or any other major writing project). It describes your topic and surveys what other scholars have written about it. It then explains what your approach to the topic will be and presents the tentative conclusions that you will reach. Finally, it explains why this topic is of significance in the field of political science and what the implications of your research will be.

Writing a good prospectus requires significant preliminary research in order to define your topic effectively and to understand how your take on your research question fits in with how others have addressed it. The basic guidelines for preparing a prospectus will fit almost any kind of senior thesis, ranging from a quantitative analysis of an empirical question to a purely theoretical thesis.

Read through the guidelines, but don't panic. You have hopefully already begun your work on this project through your literature review. You should also feel free to talk to any other faculty members, particularly those who might end up being thesis advisors for you down the road.

The draft version of your prospectus is due in class on Tuesday, November 25. The final version is due on Wednesday December 17 by 4 PM in my mailbox on the first floor of Milne Hall on the downtown campus. (You may also submit it uptown, but it must be in by 2 PM on Tuesday December 16 if you turn it in uptown.)

REQUIRED ELEMENTS OF THE PROSPECTUS

Your prospectus must have five parts: an introductory statement of the research question, a literature review, a discussion of your research strategy, a conclusory section that describes your expected outcomes and explains the implications of your research question, and a comprehensive bibliography that lists all of your primary and secondary sources. For most people, the body of the prospectus will be somewhere in the neighborhood of 10-15 pages and the bibliography will be at least two pages.

Statement of the Research Question

For most people, this section will be the hardest to write. A senior honors thesis identifies *one* coherent research question and answers it thoroughly. A good statement of your research question will identify an important problem or puzzle that your research will explain; a research question usually begins with “why” and seeks to explain rather than simply to describe something. In this section of the prospectus, you should identify and explain your research question, explain why you are asking it, and describe briefly why the question itself is significant.

In framing your research question, you can address an empirical question, a theoretical debate, or any other question that has not yet been answered convincingly in the literature on the topic. It is very important to avoid thinking about your thesis as an “exploration” of a particular topic or issue – this is probably the most common mistake that people make. For example, if you

are researching and writing about press coverage of the debate over the death penalty in New York during the past fifteen years to investigate the links between the press coverage and actions taken by political elites, you are setting yourself up for future problems. If, on the other hand, you are asking “What difference did press coverage of the death penalty in New York make in the ways that the New York legislature addressed the issue?” you have framed a successful research question and will be able to research and write your thesis much more easily.

Literature Review

A literature review addresses the previous answers to your question or to questions similar to yours. It should do three things. First, it should explain the ways that other scholars have addressed your topic. Second, it should identify the most helpful approaches used in the past and how they will contribute to your analysis. Third, it should explain ways that previous scholarship has failed to address your research question adequately, by answering it incorrectly, framing it inappropriately, or ignoring it altogether.

The main purpose of the literature review is for you to place yourself in relation to what has been written previously, thereby explaining why your new approach is necessary. In order to do this, you will need to come up with some system of categorizing the literature that you read (i.e., if your thesis is about John Stuart Mill, you may need to address utilitarian, liberal, and communitarian critiques separately). If you are having some trouble doing this, you may want to look for some scholarly book reviews concerning the main books that address your topic; book reviews often begin with a description of where the new book fits in the existing literature.

A literature review should be comprehensive, covering all of the literature that relates to your topic. It should also focus on recent developments. Faculty experts should be able to help you to locate many of the sources that you will need, but it is your responsibility to make sure that you have found them all. Be sure to look for journal articles as well as books!

Research Strategy

The discussion of research strategy should basically answer the question of how you intend to research your topic. Another way to think about this is in terms of methodology. What kinds of evidence do you need to answer your question and how will you collect this evidence?

Obviously, your research strategy must be closely related to your question. If you are asking how the lower federal courts have implemented the Americans with Disabilities Act in light of the Supreme Court’s interpretation of it, your research strategy might involve reading every case that a lower court has decided on this issue. If you are asking whether the Americans with Disabilities Act has changed the public’s perception of the competence of individuals with disabilities, your research strategy would instead include a study of any polls you can find that address attitudes toward people with disabilities.

If you are asking an empirical (or fact-based) research question, you have to answer it in factual terms. Political scientists employ a wealth of empirical research methods ranging from heavily quantitative statistical research to more qualitative approaches like ethnography or case studies. Some research questions may lend themselves easily to enabling you to collect primary data, while for others you will have to rely on others’ collection of data. When you are working on your thesis, you should consult with your thesis advisor to determine the best research method

or methods for addressing your question. For this assignment, just be sure that what you propose would enable you to answer the question you have posed.

For an empirical question, you need to explain such issues as how you selected your cases or why you used certain instruments of measurement. You also need to explain how you are measuring your variables and what you are using as the unit of analysis, or the thing you are trying to explain and the level at which you are measuring it. (A unit of analysis could be as broad as war or justice or as narrow as individual voters to measure turnout in off-year Senate races.)

Those writing theses that are primarily theoretical also have to plan their research strategies. If, for instance, you are writing a thesis about Marx, which of his texts do you intend to read and why? Are there significant differences between his early writings and later writings that should be taken into account? Should some of his collaborative works be taken more seriously than others? And are there any relevant differences between published and unpublished works?

In selecting and describing your research strategy, try to develop something that will enable you to answer your question fully and definitively. No particular strategy is required; it simply has to be something that will help you to make a convincing argument.

Expected Outcomes and Implications

The final section of your prospectus should place your research project in the broader context of the field. Why is the topic important or significant, and what do we gain from your approach to it? Return to your initial framing of the research question and explain the thematic and interpretive significance that it has. It may help for this section to imagine that you are trying to convince someone to fund your research.

Here too you may wish to take the opportunity to address the implications of your work. What new questions will it raise after you have answered your research question? Do you expect your work to have any normative implications? This section will probably be short, but it should do more than simply to restate your research question.

Bibliography

Your bibliography must include all of the relevant secondary literature that you have read for your literature review. It should include every piece of literature on your narrowly focused topic, whether you discuss it in your literature review or not. This section will be the foundation of your thesis' bibliography.

You must also include any primary research that you have conducted. For instance, if your topic is legal, you may have read a number of key cases that you mention in the prospectus. All of this information should be in the bibliography.

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS

You can use the literature review you have already done as the basis for your literature review in the prospectus, and you may, with another professor's permission, tie in another

research project with this one. Keep in close touch with Professor Novkov to be sure that you are on track.

Style and Grammar

A prospectus is a professional document and should be presented accordingly. Be sure to proofread even your rough drafts; if you have to go back and do a lot of editing in the last week, you will be very harried and will have little time to address substantive issues.

Remember that a bibliography alone is not enough to demonstrate your reliance on outside sources. Be sure to cite everything of which you do not have personal knowledge. You may choose whether to use footnotes or in-text cites, but be sure that your formatting is consistent throughout the document and that all necessary cites are in place *in every draft of every section of your prospectus*.

Additional Unsolicited Advice

Keep in mind that you can make an appointment during any faculty member's office hours to discuss your research ideas and get some feedback, even if that faculty member is not destined to be your advisor. For some topics, it may be helpful to talk to someone outside of the department as well. And don't overlook adjunct faculty members and graduate students as possible sounding boards!

As much as you can, try to use this assignment as a jumping off place for your thesis. You will feel pressured as you are working on it in the short time frame we have. Nonetheless, if you can hang in there with it, you will be well prepared. If you can survive the prospectus, the thesis will be much easier. I promise!

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