Faculty members are reluctant to give students a formula for a successful prospectus for good reason. They recognize that there is no single formula for success. A prospectus that follows a standard format may flounder, and a prospectus that deviates from the norm may excel. Moreover, faculty members recognize that the other advisors on a student’s committee may have different views on what makes for an acceptable or exceptional prospectus. Yet many students would still like some sort of guidelines. So with some trepidation, I offer my own suggestions here.

Disclaimer: This document reflects my own opinions and does not represent a consensus within the department. Expectations will vary considerably across subfields. You should consult carefully with all of the prospective members of your prospectus committee.

When should you start working on a prospectus?

That’s an easy one: start now. The single most common impediment to timely completion of the Ph.D. degree is floundering too long before choosing a dissertation topic. The solution is to start early (e.g. in the 1st year) and to search actively rather than passively. In the first two years, that means: use course papers to float possible dissertation ideas; apply for small grants to conduct pre-dissertation research; use summers to conduct pre-dissertation research; get involved in research groups/units on campus; form study groups to exchange ideas and drafts; give papers at conferences; submit papers to journals; write out early-stage ideas; and discuss possible topics with advisors. Then in the third year (or earlier): write out pre-prospectus proposals; consult with prospective advisors; form a prospectus study group; take the department’s prospectus workshop; start writing drafts; form a prospectus committee; submit drafts and then the final prospectus; schedule the defense and defend.

How do you form a prospectus committee?

You “hire” your own committee. So use this power wisely. “Interview” a relatively large number of prospective advisers (maybe 5-7). This serves two purposes: 1) It helps you with the process of brainstorming topics and/or refining your proposal. 2) It helps you determine who would be the best advisors for your project.

In my experience, students often find this awkward – but there is no reason it has to be. Students worry that faculty will be offended if they are not selected for the committee, or annoyed if they are. Both of these reactions are possible, but rare. Personally I view serving on a dissertation committee as one of the most gratifying things I do (a big plus) and also one of the most demanding (a big minus). So I do not feel burdened when I am selected, or spurned when I am not. I suspect many of my colleagues feel the same way.
So once you are done interviewing, just go right ahead and pop the question. Keep in mind that UCB rules dictate that the prospectus chair not be the dissertation chair. Students need to have at least four faculty members (one outside the department) for the prospectus committee, and at least three (one outside) for the dissertation committee. In some cases, students will find a prospectus chair “specialist” who then does not serve on the dissertation committee.

**What makes for a good topic?**

Once again there is no magic formula, but here are a few possible criteria. 1) Your own passion for the topic. You will be working on this for a long time, so you need to find a topic that can sustain your interest.

2) A good empirical question/ puzzle. Start with something that interests you substantively. Then look for a good question or puzzle. If you (and others) would really like to know what causes X, then that might be a start. Or if scholars are sharply divided on what causes Y, that might be another entry point. Or if there is a puzzling outcome, that might be promising. Country A and country B are similar in many respects, yet they are so different on C. Why?

Having noted that a good puzzle can make for a great dissertation, I should insert a couple of caveats. A) Sometimes you only find the great puzzle by doing the research. B) Some great puzzles unravel in the course of the research. You may solve your puzzle, for example, but discover that the answer is not so surprising after all.

Starting with a theoretical question/ puzzle is often less fruitful. Needless to say, if you define your mission as disproving Neo-Realism, you are not likely to succeed. I also find that students are more likely to lose their way if they begin with a particular literature. If you start with a literature, then the empirics may pull you away from that literature. This can also lead to biases in the research. Start with a question not an answer. If you start with the empirics, then you can scan for the appropriate literature.

3) Real-world importance. Topics do not have to be substantively important, but it sure helps.

4) Amenability to research. Can you answer your question via research? Can you develop testable hypotheses? Can you design a research strategy to test them? Can you do these things with limited time and financial resources?
What makes a good prospectus?

Reasonable scholars will disagree on this one too. For example, faculty vary on how they feel about: literature review, need for clearly stated hypotheses, optimal number of hypotheses. Here are my thoughts on those issues.

I feel that a stand-alone literature review is a waste of time at this stage. You did that for the preliminary exams. I would recommend cutting anything that reviews a specific school of thought or a specific piece of research in a way that is not specifically tied to your question. That is what I mean by a “stand-alone” literature review. If you could cut it out and paste it into a preliminary exam, then it qualifies for “stand-alone” status. In other words, wrap the literature around your prospectus (your argument/ hypotheses) rather than organizing your prospectus around the literature.

Instead, incorporate the literature into the presentation of hypotheses. H1: More of A leads to less of B. This hypothesis builds on the logic of Vanilla Institutionalism, especially the work of Scholar C and D, who argue E and F.

I find it very helpful to have clearly stated hypotheses in the prospectus. Can you really be sure that these are the key hypotheses at this stage? Of course not. But it pushes your thinking ahead to try to formulate the potential arguments as clearly as possible.

One of the most common problems in a prospectus is that students present hypotheses that are not hypotheses. For example, A (e.g. social policy) is a factor of B (e.g. party politics). This is not a hypothesis because it does not take the form of an “if, then” proposition. It suggests that two things (variables) are related but it does not tell us anything about how they are related. It is missing the direction of the causation and the dimensions of the outcome. In contrast, this would be a hypothesis: Governments dominated by social-democratic parties spend less on unemployment benefits than governments dominated by conservative parties.

Once you have formulated a hypothesis, you will want to explain the underlying logic (causal mechanism) and briefly note what previous research supports/ contests this approach. This is what I mean by wrapping the literature around your argument rather than the other way around.

Most good prospectuses address rival hypotheses. Do not engage in contests with straw men, but identify rivals worthy of your attention.

Other common problems: 1) No clear central question. If your reader cannot identify the central question after reading the first page of the prospectus, then you have a problem. 2) No sense of the dimensions of the dependent variable. The student says s/he is interested in social policy, but it is not clear whether this means legislation (policy outcome) or implementation (effectiveness) or impact (market or welfare outcome), or whether it means level of spending (high vs. low) or scope (universal vs. means-tested) or type of implementation (government vs. private provision).
In Comparative Politics, we often apply the “off-the-plane” test. When the student gets to the research site, will s/he know what to do next? Will s/he know what to look for?

Since I have stated that there is no single formula, I suppose it is time to roll it out. If there were a formula, this might be it:

**A Prospectus template**

1. The question
   What is the central puzzle/ question?
   What are other important questions to be addressed in the project?

2. Dependent variable
   What is the outcome you are trying to explain?
   What are the relevant dimensions of the dependent variable?
   How will you measure it?

3. Independent variables and hypotheses
   Present clear hypotheses.
   Consider null hypotheses or controls.
   Include rival/ alternative hypotheses.
   Link hypotheses to specific bodies of literature. What scholarship do these hypotheses build upon? What do they confirm/ disconfirm?

4. Methods
   What evidence will you gather? How will you test the hypotheses?
   Methods of data collection
   Criteria for case selection
   Cases selected

5. Research plan
   Include timeline and a tentative table of contents.

Recommended length: 5000 words.
What happens at the defense?

This can be one of the most fruitful exercises of your graduate career. I find that these meetings often provide breakthroughs (for both the student and the advisors) that would not be possible without the active interaction among the five participants. I typically have at least one “Aha!” moment during the meeting – despite having met one-on-one with the student several times before the meeting – and I write a short memo to the student afterward describing my new insight(s). You do yourself a disservice if you are not prepared. You might pass the exam but still miss out on the higher-level feedback you would have received if your proposal was better developed. The atmosphere at the meeting is usually supportive rather than combative.

Normally the student and the Prospectus Chair reach an agreement on the logistics ahead of time, and the Prospectus Chair serves as MC for the event. Typically, the Prospectus Chair asks the student to step out for a few moments at the beginning. This allows the committee members to get on the same page. If there is an outside member who is not familiar with practices in our department, he or she is briefed. Then the student makes a very brief (e.g. 3-5 minutes) opening statement. When I am Prospectus Chair, I encourage the student not to summarize the prospectus, but simply to report any new developments since distributing the final draft (e.g. “I am thinking of looking at one more hypothesis . . .”) and to highlight what kind of feedback would be most helpful (“I would especially welcome suggestions on how to select my cases . . .”). Other Prospectus Chairs sometimes ask for a very short summary of the prospectus, or request that the student explain how he or she got interested in the topic.

What makes for a good defense?

Be prepared, understand the weaknesses/ limitations of the prospectus, and think of strategies to address these weaknesses. You do not need to “defend” everything, but simply engage the questions and comments in a thoughtful way. In my experience, faculty members are much more worried about a student who thinks he or she has everything figured out (and doesn’t) than a student who recognizes weaknesses and has thought about them. Likewise, if a student reports that s/he has not selected the cases yet, that does not bother me. But if s/he cannot describe how s/he plans to select the cases, then that is a problem.

How do you form a dissertation committee?

You will need to identify the dissertation committee at the time of the defense. You can change it (“hire” and “fire” committee members) later by filing another form. Many students simply carry over the Prospectus Committee as the Dissertation Committee without really thinking about it. Some do so because they are afraid that they might offend a committee member if they drop him/ her. Don’t be so sure: maybe the advisor would be delighted to be dropped! Personally, I have enjoyed coming in as a one-time advisor in the role of Prospectus Chair and then dropping from the committee altogether.
I have felt that I was able to help the student with one major dose of input, and that I might not have had that much to offer beyond that.

In any case, more is not always better when it comes to dissertation committees. I would recommend sticking to 3 members unless there is a substantive/ methodological reason why you really need 4. For example, if you feel you need an expert on a certain country and a certain topic and a certain method, and these happen to be three different people, then maybe you really need 4 members. Anything over 4 is too big. A large committee can be problematic at the finish line because you will need all of the signatures in order to file. If you have not kept up very well with one committee member, or if a committee member feels like a fifth wheel, it may be difficult to get that member to read the dissertation in a timely manner, or that member might bring up unexpected (unwelcome) objections or conditions for approval.

**Recommended Readings**