

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A RESEARCH PAPER PROSPECTUS AND INTRODUCTION IN HISTORY

I. WRITING A PROSPECTUS FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT

Although you may not be able to answer all of these questions in your prospectus, you should have some solid preliminary answers.

1. Thesis statement or hypothesis (one or two paragraphs)
 - a. the topic or subject of your examination
 - b. the question you are going to ask about the subject, based on a series of premises about the subject (what you already know about the subject, and the perspective from which you will examine the subject)
 - c. the argument you are going to make about it (this will undoubtedly shift as you research and write, but you need to begin to formulate a hypothesis to help direct your inquiry)
2. Sources: annotated bibliography
 - a. primary sources or documents (either published or located in archival collections): explain why you've chosen these sources
 - b. the secondary literature (historiography), both specific to the particular topic and/or more broadly related to the field of study: explain what these studies offer to your study (e.g., the information they provide, the author's argument and perspective, etc.)

NOTE: How to find sources:

Hawthorne-Longfellow Library (see the online Library Research Guide for History 3122):

1. on-line catalog (be inventive, but specific enough)
2. reference bibliographies (autobiographies, diaries, etc.)
3. government documents (ask Barbara Levergood)—e.g. censuses
4. newspaper microfilm (and indices)
5. for community: F section (Library of Congress): various sources organized by state
6. internet database search engines

For primary source materials, check the footnotes and bibliography in good secondary sources on the topic. Try to find primary sources that have not been edited and/or interpreted by an historian.

3. Methodology

How you will use the primary sources that you have found.

What kinds of evidence do the sources provide? What are some of the limitations of the sources (e.g., what they do not include or address, the extent to which the author's perspective shapes the account or rendition)? All sources have perspectives, purposes, and underlying intentions that you need to consider; you can still use them, but be careful about taking the evidence at face value.

4. Projected outline of the essay

NOTE: Think of your prospectus as a work-in-progress. As you work with the secondary literature on your subject, either broadly or narrowly conceived, you should think about how your study fits into the historiographical literature.

As you begin to analyze your primary sources, you may discover that you need additional sources, which you should add to the annotated bibliography. And, as you analyze the evidence in both your primary and secondary sources, you may discover that your thesis premises have changed, and that you need to revise, or rethink altogether, your thesis question.

As you begin to write your essay, your work-in-progress prospectus will become the foundation for your introduction.

II. THE INTRODUCTION TO A RESEARCH PAPER

You may choose to preface your introduction with a hook story, or with one or more short quotations.

The introductory paragraph should begin with the subject of your essay, whether broadly or narrowly conceived. Then present the thesis premises (again, what you already know about the subject, and the perspective from which you will examine the subject) which lead to either an implicit or explicit thesis question. Your thesis statement (which may be more than a single sentence) answers the thesis question.

To locate your study, offer a brief review of the historiographical literature (the secondary sources and the groundwork they provide) on your subject. For some topics, the literature directly addresses your subject; for other topics, the literature might offer a more general framework.

In the final section of the introduction (the sources and methodology section), offer a brief, but thoughtful discussion of the primary sources (or primary-secondary sources—early histories written from a secondary perspective but that you use as a primary source) that you present, consider and analyze. Explain how you have used them (the advantages of the sources) and some of the limitations of the sources (e.g., what they do not include or address, the extent to which the author’s perspective shapes the account or rendition, etc.).

In this section, you can use the first person to describe how you use or combine or connect particular sources, but try to use it judiciously. To avoid the passive voice, describe what the primary sources include or provide or indicate. For many of your primary sources, and all of your secondary sources, you can discuss what the author of the text wrote, argued, included, omitted, etc.

Note: since you will have already discussed your sources, when you begin your discussion and analysis in the body of your essay, you can focus your attention on your interpretation.

To separate your preface and introduction from the body of your essay, a triple space or two double spaces between the introduction and your discussion and analysis is sufficient. You can do the same between your discussion and your conclusion. Try to avoid subheads.

NOTE: In History, we use footnote or endnote format for citations and provide a bibliography of the sources that we consult, rather than parenthetical citations and a works-cited page:

Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide from the Chicago Manual of Style at

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

Bowdoin Library Chicago Quick Guide – “Notes and Bibliography” style at

<http://library.bowdoin.edu/help/chicago-note-bibliography.pdf>

For a quick lesson on correct format, see Patrick Rael’s “My Handouts for Writing Papers” on his faculty home page at <http://academic.bowdoin.edu/faculty/P/prael/>.