

Guide to Writing a Dissertation Prospectus
Modern Religious Thought: Theology, Philosophy, Ethics, and Culture

revised 10/05

A dissertation is a demonstration that you have become an active participant within a particular field of scholarship—familiar with a set of conversations within your field and capable of making important contributions to them. Commonly, a dissertation takes the form of an extended argument intended to establish a thesis, which is a compelling answer to an important question.

Writing a prospectus is a very helpful way of planning a dissertation, even though your plans are likely to change after you become further engrossed in the research and writing process. Some dissertation advisors recommend a rather lengthy prospectus that can become the basis for an introduction to the dissertation; others recommend a shorter prospectus that is more in the order of an outline. Please consult your advisor and other members of your dissertation committee for guidance. Whatever its specific form or length, a prospectus ought to provide a reasonably clear indication of what you plan to argue, in what manner, and to what end. You are encouraged to include the following elements in your prospectus:

- I. A statement of the **kind** of dissertation you propose to write, i.e., the subgenre. Some examples are:
 - a critical analysis of a writer's treatment of a topic
 - an immanent critique of a system of thought
 - a comparative analysis of two or more authors from two or more (philosophical or religious) traditions on a particular topic
 - a critical analysis of the state of a particular question or debate within the discipline
 - a constructive ethical argument within the domain of ethical theory or applied ethics
- II. A statement of the **topic** of your dissertation, i.e., the central question or problem that you plan to investigate. Give some good reasons for choosing this topic. Reflect on its significance for scholarship in your field. Indicate the current state of scholarship on the topic.
- III. A statement of your **thesis**, i.e., your proposed answer to the question or problem of the dissertation, along with a preliminary assessment of the contribution it will make to scholarship.
- IV. An **outline of the argument** of your dissertation, i.e., an indication of the major steps of the argument that you plan to construct in order to establish your thesis. These steps usually become the main parts of the dissertation.

Ideally, your outline ought also to specify subsidiary parts of the dissertation. For example, your prospectus might indicate the need to include in the dissertation a chapter that reviews the secondary literature on your topic or a chapter that reviews the history of the topic, leading up to its formulation in a particular thinker or thinkers.

- V. A statement of your **methodology**, i.e., an explanation and theoretical justification for proceeding in the way that you plan to proceed.

- VI. A statement of your **material sources**, i.e., the sources on which you will rely in constructing your argument. Depending on the kind of dissertation you write, you may, for example, include a preliminary bibliography and/or a discussion of archival materials.