

Suggestions for Preparation of A Thesis/Dissertation Prospectus

Department of Geological Sciences, University of Florida

The primary purpose of writing a prospectus is to organize your thoughts and ideas about the problem you are planning to attack and the approach you are planning to use. Putting these thoughts together and understanding the background of the problem will help you prepare to begin your research.

The prospectus does not need to be long. An M.S. prospectus should be 4-6 pages of text plus figures, maps, and references. This means we will accept a **maximum of 6 pages** of text. A Ph.D. prospectus should be 5-15 pages of text. Your objective is to demonstrate that you have identified an important problem, you understand the significance of that problem, and you have a plan for how to address that problem. This prospectus is a "starting point" for your research. For PhD students, your supervisory committee may later request that you revise or expand upon the prospectus as your research evolves.

Your proposal should initially be read and approved by your advisor who serves as your supervisory chairperson. After this approval it needs to be approved by the Graduate Coordinator (this may take a few revisions). Once your prospectus is approved, you should form an advisory committee in collaboration with your advisor. At that point you will need arrange a meeting of all the members of your advisory committee and give each of them a copy of your prospectus. A copy of the approved prospectus should also be turned in to the Geology Office to be put in your file, and your supervisory committee will be entered into the UF system.

The University can block you from being appointed as a TA if you do not have a committee by your third semester (after 12 hours of class work). This means you have to have your prospectus approved by the Graduate Coordinator before Fall term of your second year. You should have your prospectus done by the beginning of summer so you can have a more productive summer for research.

Your primary objective in preparing this prospectus is to organize your research, find out what is known about your topic and to capture the interest of your committee. If you describe an important problem and then explain how you intend to solve it, you will convert the reviewer from a skeptic to an advocate for approval of your proposed research. If after reading your prospectus, a reviewer says "So what?", "Why is this important?", or "What's the problem being addressed?", or "Can these objectives be achieved using these techniques?", then you have not been successful. One good way to prejudge how well you have gotten your points across is to reread your prospectus (before submitting it), putting yourself in the position of a reviewer. Or, better yet, ask another student or one of your close friends to read it.

When you look at your prospectus from the point of view of the reviewer, you will see why it is so important to describe the problem you are addressing or the hypothesis you plan to test. Without this firmly established, it is pointless to tell the reviewer all of things you will do in the field or the laboratory. The logical next question is "Is that problem or hypothesis significant enough to be worth working on?" One way to assess this is to ask yourself "Assuming I am successful in doing everything that I say I will, how many geologists will want to hear the

results.?" If you conclude "Not many", then you need to rethink why you chose the project, and explain its importance more convincingly. If you feel that you single-handedly need to solve the most pressing problems in geology, the scope of any project must be limited to what can be realistically accomplished. But do concern yourself about how your results will contribute to the solution of a fundamental problem in your discipline, or why your field area is ideal for addressing a significant regional or topical problem.

Once you have established the significance of your project, specify what you will do (i.e., your research strategy). Make sure you explain to the reviewer how these steps will lead you to answers to the questions you have set out to solve. This is the time to provide details; don't leave it to a reviewer to decide whether your research plan will answer the questions. Tell the reviewer how it will.

Guidelines for the prospectus are listed below.

THESIS/DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS GUIDELINES

- 1) **Title Page:**
This section should include title, supervisors name, your name, date, and space for your advisor and a member of the graduate committee to sign.
- 2) **Project Summary**
One (for M.S.) to two (for PhD) paragraph summary of your proposed project.
- 3) **Introduction**
Brief introduction to the topic/area that you plan to study. What are the big questions in your topic area, why are they important, and what gap does your research fill? End the introduction with a brief statement summarizing your proposed research.
- 4) **Background**
This section should focus on what is known (literature survey). This can be background on your research method and your field area (if appropriate). What work has previously been done on these methods or this area? Why is the field area selected appropriate for your research?
- 5) **Questions to be addressed/ Hypotheses to be tested:**
These should not be the specific data you'll collect (those will go in the "Research Plan"), but instead describe the science questions that your research will answer or the specific hypothesis that the research will test.
- 6) **Research Plan:**
This section should include types of data to be collected, how the data will be collected (analytical methodologies, field work, modeling) , and how long it will take to collect the data. **Be sure to explain how the data collected will be used to answer the questions/test your hypotheses.** If your thesis is part of a larger project (such as an

advisor's NSF project), specify what aspects of the research you will do, and what parts others will do.

7) Research Time-line and Funding:

An estimate of the time need to complete the major tasks discussed above. Include and estimate of when you plan to submit a first draft of your thesis and an estimated time for your defense. Keep in mind the strict dates for submission and defenses dictated by the Graduate School. Indicate funding sources for the research and your stipend during your research.

Once you have written your prospectus:

- 1) Reread it and then rewrite it!
- 2) Have fellow students read it and critique it for you.
- 3) Have your advisor read it and then rewrite it according to his/her comments. The copy you submit to the Graduate Coordinator must have your supervisor's signature on it to demonstrate that he/she has read it and approved it.

Once your prospectus is approved:

- 1) Make a copy of the signed version and bring it to the Geology Office for your file.
- 2) Meet with your advisor and finalize your list of potential supervisory committee members.
- 3) Contact all your potential committee members, give them a copy of your prospectus, and ensure that they are willing to serve on the committee.
- 4) Go to the Geology office, where your Supervisory Committee information will be entered online. This is essential! It needs to be done before the end of your second semester.
- 5) Schedule a supervisory committee meeting to discuss your plans and progress. You should meet with your committee once a year. This is an excellent opportunity to get feedback from faculty other than your advisor. If you put someone on your committee and then hand him/her a thesis 2 years later, you will lose out on a lot of useful input.