

PNP Prospectus Checklist

A successful prospectus will normally have each of the following features:

- Page length: 20 to 40 pages.
- Formatting: Double-spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins.
- Abstract: 250 word summary of the central argument of the dissertation.
- Demonstration Argument: The prospectus should be built around a detailed, substantive philosophical argument that figures centrally in your dissertation. (This could be an argument about a single case or area with the suggestion that it can be generalized to other cases or areas.)
- Proposed Outline or Chapter Summaries: These should sketch a proposed structure for the entire dissertation and make clear how the demonstration argument fits into the overall project.
- Bibliography: Lists a representative sample of the relevant literature on the topic.

Your Dissertation Prospectus

Topic Selection

First, consider what you should be aiming for in a **dissertation**. Rather than simply thinking about an interesting problem, focus on an extended philosophical *argument* that bears on an interesting problem. Think of your dissertation as a basis for research that will

1. Play a pivotal role in your search for a position in a good department;
2. Lead to a monograph or a series of papers; and, eventually, tenure.

Writing a Prospectus

Once you have a topic, you are ready to prepare a **prospectus** that will demonstrate your preparedness to complete a dissertation.

- Build your prospectus around a detailed, substantive philosophical argument that will figure centrally in your dissertation.
- A prospectus will, in most cases, resemble a journal article rather than a broad ‘overview’, literature survey, or collection of chapter abstracts.
- It might be helpful to think of the prospectus as a draft for a central dissertation chapter.
- Thus, although a successful prospectus will contain an argument capable of standing on its own in an article, a prospectus would normally differ from an article in situating the argument in the context of the larger dissertation project.

The prospectus begins with a succinct (one or, at most, two paragraph, 250-word)

abstract in which you say what you’re doing, why it’s important, and how you plan to do

it. (Incidentally, *if you can't say what your thesis is about in a single sentence, you probably don't know what it's about!*) The prospectus should minimize footnotes and make use of the author/date citation method keyed to a representative **bibliography**.

Common Pitfalls

One common mistake is to begin working on an interesting problem without any clear conception of how you intend to solve it. Just as in the law, don't ask a question unless you already know the answer. Your answer might evolve in various ways, but don't assume that, if you think hard enough about a problem, an answer will eventually occur to you in the course of polishing your concluding chapter. Remember, you're looking for an interesting *argument*.

Another mistake is to choose a topic that falls outside the *research interests and competence of members of our faculty*. Start by familiarizing yourself individual faculty members' research agendas. Does anything being actively investigated here in our midst strike you as interesting? Can you see a problem in one of the represented areas for which you have some ideas as to a solution? The next step is to discuss the problem, your take on it, and what you have to say about it with the pertinent faculty members.

Consider whether you would be **comfortable** working with particular faculty members before plunging ahead: remember, you'll need a helpful, sympathetic committee. The idea is not to turn yourself into a research clone, but to make the best use of resources at your disposal.