

WRITING A RESEARCH PROSPECTUS

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There is an inevitable tension when doing research between being as efficient as possible and being open-minded about the documents and problems luck throws your way. Some of your most intriguing and important discoveries will be the product of serendipity--the book next to the one you originally went to find, the person with whom you accidentally struck up a conversation, the long-ignored bundle of letters in someone's attic. But serendipity seems to happen most often to those who are prepared for it: only by planning your research in advance will you cover enough ground and ask enough questions to recognize the unexpected when you stumble upon it. Heraclitus: "If you do not expect it, you will not find the unexpected, for it is hard to find and difficult." Research goes best when you know why you are doing it.

To help organize your research so as to prepare for serendipity--and also to help you figure out which documents you don't need to research--I suggest that you draft an essay outlining your overall research strategy for the project. The prospectus should be about 10-15 pages long, and should include the following elements:

1. A section defining your general subject and explaining why you chose it. What most fascinates you about it? Why should someone else who knows nothing about this topic bother to learn about it?
2. A section identifying the questions you want to answer about your topic. Make these as clear and precise as possible. General questions ("How has the automobile changed North America?") are rarely helpful except as a first step, because they give little indication of how you should go about answering them. More specific questions ("When did suburbs begin to appear in Los Angeles that required their residents to use a car in order to commute to work?") are more useful because they suggest routes to their own solutions.
3. A section stating what you suspect to be the most likely answers to these questions. Your answers will obviously be intuitive, based on very little research, and in all likelihood will be wrong; they will surely be too simple. But putting them on paper accomplishes two crucial tasks: it gives you a stated position to test and criticize as your research proceeds; and it helps you identify your own biases. Stating these frankly allows you to keep an especially sharp eye out for any evidence that contradicts those biases, and allows you to modify your arguments accordingly.
4. A bibliographical essay (roughly 3-6 pages long) describing--in general terms--the categories of documents you plan to examine in answering your questions, with pertinent examples of each where possible. What will each different type of document contribute to your research? For which specific problems do your documentary resources seem strongest? For which are they weakest? Concentrate your attention on primary materials, but mention any secondary works you plan to use in putting your specific topic in its larger context. How will your project move beyond existing historiography?
5. A chapter outline, listing the sequence of topics you intend to cover in the finished text. This is probably the single most helpful part of the prospectus, since it forces you to imagine the final shape of your argument and to put it in the form of a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. The sooner you can start monitoring the ways in which your research relates to your evolving chapter structure--to your argument and to your story--the more focused, efficient, and satisfying the overall process will become.
6. Finally, construct a rough sequence of how you plan to move through these various materials. What will you do first? Why? Where will you go from there? And so on. Then assign actual dates to these tasks, and put them on a calendar.

Don't be overwhelmed by the description I give here: this essay requires more thoughtwork than spadework. You are creating a sketch map whose outlines will certainly change--perhaps drastically--the instant you actually embark on your research. That's OK. The point is to define your beginning, so that you can look back and know where you've been as your journey progresses, and more easily resurvey your map as the need arises.