



Writing Tip #20: Writing Your Research Prospectus

What is a prospectus?

A prospectus is a proposal to undertake a research project. A prospectus is a statement that briefly describes the questions, materials, and methods a researcher will use in his or her research. A prospectus indicates that the research project fits the required parameters.

What are the parts of the prospectus?

1. A prospectus contains a clear, concise introduction to the topic of the research.
2. A prospectus states the main research question(s) that the researcher wishes to answer.
3. A prospectus summarizes the basic arguments that surround the research topic.
4. A prospectus lists the basic research materials; these may be listed according to title and author, or they may include annotations. If experts in the topic are to be consulted, their names are also included. (NOTE: The list of basic research materials may not be a complete list of all materials that are finally used in the research, but should indicate the research direction and the types of materials the researcher plans to examine and study.)
5. The prospectus usually does not include the researcher's thesis, except as the basis for the research questions. If the researcher believes a certain thing to be true, but has no substantive evidence to support that belief, then the researcher's belief drives the questions that must be answered in order to demonstrate the correctness of the belief. In certain types of research, especially scientific research, the investigator must state a hypothesis, what the researcher will attempt to prove or disprove, in the prospectus. The hypothesis gives the researcher's supposition or unproved theory as the basis for the investigation.

To whom is a prospectus written?

The audience for the prospectus is the reader who will determine whether or not the research project should be undertaken. This reader may be a professor, a research committee, a graduate degree committee, a funding agency, or the management of the company or agency for whom the researcher will conduct the study.

In what style should a prospectus be written?

A formal style generally is preferred. Since the prospectus can not present the researcher's conclusion, i.e., the research has yet to be done, write the prospectus in the third person. More importantly, use active voice verbs and a writer's voice that demonstrates confidence that the research has merit. A prospectus that "sounds" dubious or not well considered typically indicates that the research project is dubious and not well considered.

How long should a prospectus be?

A prospectus needs to cover the basic points to assure the reader that the researcher plans a substantive project. Beyond that minimum, the length of the prospectus should be proportionate to that of the project. The research assignment may specify an optimal or maximum length.