

Preparing the Dissertation Prospectus and Preliminary Exam Fields: Guidelines, Tips and Suggestions for soon-to-be Ph.D. Candidates

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Preparing the Dissertation Prospectus:

The prospectus is many things at once: a description of a topic, a plan of research for that topic, an assurance of your ability to conduct the research, an articulation of an anticipated argument about it, and, in a way, a kind of sales pitch. It should be about ten pages long, double-spaced. It should be comprehensible to someone who is intelligent and versed in visual culture, but who may not be familiar with your topic or even be aware of the existence of the works you intend to write about.

The prospectus should be polished and academically rigorous, but enticing, not dry. It is a form of persuasive writing: it should instill a desire in your reader to read and learn more, it should make your topic sound interesting and consequential. It should work a bit like an advertisement for your dissertation — but avoiding hyperbole. Use active, concise sentence structure. Avoid excessive adjectives and modifiers (“highly,” “radically,” etc.). Avoid academic clichés (“the ways in which,” etc.).

Everyone knows that your precise argument will shift as you conduct your research and begin the writing process. Nevertheless, the tone of the prospectus should be confident— without being dogmatic or forceful. Use the first person if it is part of your repertoire of writing techniques. Resist the temptation to stake out an original position by trashing the work of a senior scholar. A list of well-formulated questions can be just as persuasive and original as a rigid declaration.

Ask your peers for copies of their prospecti to give you ideas about structure & tone. The format varies. One possible template: a 300-word abstract at the top, followed by a longer prospectus including 1) an opening paragraph offering an anecdote, mini-close reading, or description that encapsulates and introduces the topic; 2) one paragraph describing your own argument or intervention into the topic, and how your intervention enhances our current understanding of it, in relationship to the existing scholarship; 3) 3-5 paragraphs describing the topic, your archive of materials/artworks/films, your theoretical or methodological toolkit, and the set of questions and issues you will address in general terms; 4) more detailed chapter summaries and breakdowns, each about 1-2 paragraphs, including working chapter titles; 5) a plan of research, including a timeline, summary of work already completed, list of grants & funding sources you intend to apply to or have applied to, and archives or other sources you will need to visit; 6) a short, working, selected bibliography. You will also need to include a working dissertation title and your primary adviser’s name.

Preparing the Sample Bibliography:

At this stage, you should be thinking expansively, allowing all possible free associations and new ideas to come to the fore. However, in the document you circulate to the department, it is best if

the sample items you list either 1) have a strongly motivated, obvious connection to your topic; 2) be canonical authors, texts, or works directly in the field; or 3) be explained in your prospectus so that it is clear why they are on the list. It may be tempting to include an item that is apparently far afield, but which you see as having special resonance with your topic, an item that you think may contain a silver bullet, but that you have not yet read or seen, or a theory text that sounds cutting-edge and sophisticated, but that you aren't able to explicate clearly — but why open the door to objections or confusion at this stage, unless it's necessary? You should be prepared to defend and answer questions about anything that you include in the prospectus.

Preparing the Prelim Field Lists:

The prelim list should have 50-100 works of art or films on it, or 25-50 texts for a reading-only field, depending on their length and complexity. Ideally, at least half of them should be things you have already seen or read at least once. An art or film field bibliography should also include a short bibliography of relevant written scholarly texts (about 20 items depending on their length).

Do not list whole anthologies of writings; provide separate entries for each relevant essay and author (treat them like journal articles).

Imagining that you are creating a syllabus for a course with the same title as your field can be a useful way to help you determine its parameters, must-include films, structuring concepts, range of historical or geographical coverage, etc.

Total coverage is likely to be impossible. Therefore, when creating your lists, choose films that are most interesting to you and most likely to be of value for your dissertation. That said, there are always canonical texts that must be included in any field, regardless of their relevance to your own research. Consult with your advisors and peers who have studied in similar fields, and check the indexes and filmographies of major textbooks in the field to determine what these are. Ask your peers for copies of their lists and questions to use as templates, to get a sense of their scope and the various ways they have organized their fields.

As you brainstorm for and create your prelim lists, find ways of organizing your materials that will help you to analyze and generate questions about your field. Try playing around with the items: list them chronologically, then by artist, genre, style, region, theme, etc. — and see what issues and questions these groupings bring to the fore.

About 3 weeks prior to your exam, I would like you to submit a list of 4-5 questions that you write yourself, as if you were the examiner for this field. This exercise helps you to identify key issues and themes. The questions should be fairly broad in scope: impossible to answer well by, say, only writing about one book. But they should not be so broad as to be vague, or as to be answerable simply by regurgitating information. They should call for some analysis, argument, or close description, and they should require you to adopt a position in relation to the material: in other words, breadth and depth simultaneously.

Sample question #1: Film Theory. Discuss the tension between realism and formalism in film theory. Who are the realists and the formalists, and why do they each advocate for the position they do? What is at stake in this debate? Your essay should draw on at least four authors from your list.

Sample question #2: Post-war Avant-garde Film. Discuss the role of found footage in post-war avant-garde film. Consider its various types, uses, and modes of operation. How do found footage practices in experimental film relate to practices of appropriation, the ready-made, postmodern pastiche, and/or electronic sampling? Your essay should cite at least four works by different artists on your list.

Finding Materials:

If you are working with films that are not commercially available, you will have to plan carefully to view them at archives (MoMA's film study center is probably the easiest), at venues like Anthology Film Archives if they happen to screen there, to rent or purchase them directly from a distributor, or to acquire them through other means. We can request copies of films on DVD if they are distributed that way and acquire them through the library's budget. Note, though, that independently distributed DVDs normally cost much more than commercial DVDs and may not be within budget. Many of these might also be available on Ubu Web or similar streaming video sites – not the best quality, but certainly better than nothing. Arleen Zimmerle, the Canaday media librarian, is very good at finding things and I highly recommend asking her her help if you need assistance locating films.

Be sure to take very careful notes if you are viewing films in an archive, as this may be your only chance. Sketches can be helpful, as can time-coded notes and digital photographs as an aide-memoire. If you anticipate working with dialogue or text titles, be sure to transcribe them verbatim.

Here's a list of general suggestions for expanding your bibliography and filmography during your research phase, and for generating titles for your prelim lists: 1) Search titles of films that you know you will definitely be writing about in the AFI/BFI Film Index to see if they have entries. There is a link to it under Bryn Mawr Libraries – Databases by Subject – Film and Media Studies. Often there is valuable info or literature citations. 2) Do searches in Proquest, Project Muse, JSTOR, The International Index of the Performing Arts, and the Film Literature Index for all the film titles, add all the relevant critical essays and/or reviews and/or other journalistic ephemera to your bibliography. 3) Follow the trail of citations in any good scholarly articles you find, and note any relevant texts or films you stumble upon in this manner that you may want to explore further.

Sometimes, the old-fashioned method of going into the library stacks and browsing the shelves around the area where your texts or journals are physically located can lead to useful discoveries. It's also useful to visit university press or museum bookstores and do the same when you have the opportunity.