

History 905: Dissertation Practicum
(W 1-3:50 in Hamilton 425)

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Office Hours: M 4:30; W 5-5:45 and Th 9:30-10; 11-12; and by appointment (DO NOT HESITATE TO CONTACT ME, COME SEE ME.)

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History 905 is designed to enable students to write a strong dissertation prospectus and grant proposal. Each student in the course knows more about her or his particular topic than any other student or faculty member at UNC-CH. However, each of us can benefit from the comments and criticism of our colleagues in designing a plan to fulfill our project. As we would like patrons to provide resources to fund our research and, in turn, for the finished project to lead to publications and employment, we need to work to assure that others understand and appreciate the importance of the questions we pose and of the answers we provide.

Students will work closely with their advisors and with the course instructor on the dissertation prospectus and grant proposal. In addition, they will work in writing groups of about 8-9 students. In creating these groups, I will try to include students with both shared theoretical/methodological interests and students with very different ones. In both the prospectus and grant proposals, you will need to be able to speak to those who work in your area of expertise and to those who do not. If there will necessarily be some oral exchange of background information (Who was Bismarck? Who was Buchanan?), the point of this class is for students to develop the historical questions they are asking and their methodological and theoretical perspectives, not to instruct others on the historical context of their projects.

Making and responding to open, honest criticism is an important part of this class. Authors, it is much better that you hear concerns now than that be muted to appear only in your oral exams or in the discussions of fellowship decision committees (when you can't be there to set them straight!) Should you accept all—or perhaps even most of the criticism you receive? Probably not. But you need to understand why readers are troubled or underwhelmed by elements of your prospectus or grant applications. Very often critics ask the right questions, but offer no solution or the wrong solution. However, by alerting you to troubled areas, they've done you a big favor.

Course Grade: This will be determined by the evaluation of the instructor and of the advisor(s) of your prospectus and grant proposals, as well as the instructor's evaluation of the quality of your critiques of other students' work in both writing and discussion. .

WHAT IS A PROSPECTUS?¹

A dissertation prospectus of about twenty pages will be due on Dec. 11. Keep in mind that virtually all grant and book proposals are much shorter than this. If you spend your time writing a very lengthy prospectus, you will just be faced with cutting it down.

This outline covers the major categories of a prospectus, but feel free to blend, compress, or omit sections to fit your needs and your committee's preferences. For example, you may want to separate your sections on method and theory or blend your discussion of methods and sources. Please discuss this outline with your dissertation advisor. He/she may encourage you to emphasize some things over others, blend sections in a certain way, etc. If you and your advisor agree on some preferences that may affect how you approach the assignments, let me know so that we can decide how to proceed. Page lengths are only suggestions; you may well have good reason to make other decisions for your proposal.

1. Title. A descriptive title that succinctly, accurately, and, if possible, intriguingly, describes the topic and the period covered.

2. Abstract. A short paragraph summarizing the proposal.

3. Topic, Questions, and Rationale. What you are writing about? (This is your topic.) What is not known about it? (This is your question.) Why do you want to know this unknown? (This is your rationale.) To put this another way: I am writing about (my topic), because I am trying to show you who/how/why (my question *and* my hypothesis – a hint of what I think the answers will be), in order to persuade you to think differently about issues of large import (my rationale). Sometimes, it is helpful to begin with a story that illustrates the questions you wish to address, but if you choose this route, be careful not to let the story obscure what you are trying to convey. Many such stories that are appropriate for chapter 1 of a dissertation do not work well in a prospectus or grant application. (c. 2-3 pages)

4. Historiography. This usually entails (a) an overview of the secondary literature on the *general subject* within which your topic falls (this may include relevant research in historical fields other than your own and in disciplines other than history), and (b) the historiography of your *specific topic*. This section should be clear about what has been done, what needs to be done, and why—and how your project addresses this need. You may want to point to models for what you hope to do, while at the same time making clear how your work will extend or challenge what has gone before. You may want to discuss only the major and most relevant works and to append a longer bibliography. If

¹ I've adopted this from Jacquelyn Hall's syllabus for this course. She in turn gives credit to Judith Bennett and Lloyd Kramer.... Historians are like that.

I have copies of a number of old prospectuses you can read. Where appropriate, ask your adviser if there is a prospectus or two s/he suggests you read, and ask their authors if you can.

so and if necessary, the bibliography may extend the prospectus beyond twenty pages. (5-7 pages)

5. Method and Theory.² Here, you outline the research strategies, methods, and theoretical frameworks that will help you answer the questions asked in the previous section. (You may want to address some of these issues in the historiography section by including relevant theoretical works or by discussing the methodologies and theoretical concerns that have guided previous works in your field.) “Methods” might include statistical analysis, oral history³, ethnography, archival research, readings of visual images and material objects. “Theories” might include Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonial studies, memory studies, queer theory, concepts from cultural anthropology, and the new historicism and other schools of literary criticism, to name a few. Two points: (a) The goal in the case of most historians is not to identify yourself as an “ist” of one persuasion or another. Ask how your work relates to the questions various “isms” raise and the ways they answer them. What would enrich your project and what wouldn’t? Most of this thinking won’t appear in your prospectus, but it should be done; (b) Methods and theories are not simply tools to use; your work may suggest critiques or revisions in methods and theories. Be aware of this. It could be the most important contribution of your research project.

In this section, as in the historiography section above, you will be suggesting the conversations you seek to join, for those conversations will affect your choice of method and theory. Do you see yourself as speaking mainly to an audience of specialists in a certain geographical or chronological subfield of history? As building bridges among subfields and/or disciplines? As addressing policy makers, activists, or various publics? (5 pages)

6. Sources. First, what sorts of evidence will you use? Legal or religious records, survey data, manuscript censuses, interviews, diaries, letters, material artifacts, music, folklore, or what? How rich are these sources (for the questions you are posing) and what special problems do they present? (You will probably want to discuss here how the sources have been used in the past by scholars working in your area.) Will you use an extensive and coherent body of papers or will you be piecing together documents, artifacts, and clues from many places? Second, what have you discovered about access? Are your archives closed in August? If you are doing interviews, how will you choose your interviewees and evaluate the evidence that oral history provides? Do you need to begin now to submit Freedom of Information Act requests (or something similar for non-U.S.

² Do you put your fingers up in the shape of a cross when you hear “method and theory”? Take a book you view as similar in nature to what you plan to do in your dissertation and assess how the author posed her questions, identified sources, and analyzed the sources to respond to the questions posed. Like the *bourgeois gentilhomme* realizing he spoke prose, some of us are shocked to find that we too are using methodology and theory (and can get better and more creative in these areas once we see this.)

³If you plan to do interviews, go to the Institutional Research Board website: <http://ohre.unc.edu/forms.php>. You’ll need their authorization. You can start by taking their on-line course to get certified.

archives)? Do you need to locate papers hidden away in attics? How do you plan to deal with any evidentiary or logistical obstacles you encounter? (2-3 pages)

7. Organization. Will you proceed topically or chronologically? Envisage how you envisage the final product. Provide titles of chapters with a brief explanation of the contents of each. Discuss what would be most helpful for you with your adviser.

8. Time table. How much time will you allot to research, writing, and polishing? If you end up writing a dissertation that takes forever to complete, you will not be doing yourself a favor. Now is the time to start making decisions about what you can and cannot do. A dissertation is the end of doctoral training, but it is rarely the end of research and writing. Since you will be working further on the topic to produce articles and, perhaps, a book, you do not need to cover every aspect of a subject between reaching ABD status and acquiring your PhD--indeed, you *cannot* cover everything. When you construct your timetable, think about where you'll be at the eighteenth-month point when you'll meet informally with at least three members of your committee. At that time, you'll need to circulate (a) a 2-4 page statement of archival work and findings; (b) the timeline and table of contents from the original prospectus; (c) a revised timeline, and a revised and annotated table of contents. Those who complete their research and begin writing strong dissertations expeditiously are most like to receive dissertation completion fellowships from the department, the Graduate School and other sources.

9. Mowry Application. To receive the Department's Mowry Dissertation Fellowship, you are generally expected to include a brief application in your prospectus, get it approved at your defense, and then present it to the DGS. For more information, go to the department's website.

Schedule

Section numbers in the syllabus refer to those in “What is a Prospectus?”

Aug. 26 No Class. I will schedule individual meetings with each of you during this week.

All students will be placed in one of two groups, **the Mods** or **the Rockers** by Aug. 31. As member of one group or the other, you will not meet every week. Use your time well. Writing and rewriting takes time. My advice is to start thinking about sections like historiography and method and theory right away. You know where you need to do the most work and should consult your advisor(s) and me if you need guidance. You may have several weeks to produce first drafts of these sections, but you’ll need it.

Sep. 2 No Class.

[By Fri., Sep. 4 at 11 a.m., each **Mod** will post sections 1, 2, and 3 on the Blackboard Discussion site. By Tues. Sep. 8 at noon, each **Mod** will post a two paragraph response to the 1,2,3 posts of each **Mod**. The first paragraph will discuss what works particularly well. The second will address areas which need improvement or development. We will follow this format all semester long. Depending on the nature of the material and student responses to it, these paragraphs may be of quite different lengths.]

Sept. 9 **The Mods** will meet to discuss their sections 1,2, and 3. We will begin the discussion of each individual’s work by having that individual summarize briefly the response to their work, without referring to individual critiques. What did the author find most helpful? surprising? troubling? We will then open the discussion to all. Critics should not feel bound by what they said in their written comments. Perhaps things which were unclear or seemingly unimportant have become clear or important. Perhaps a comment by the author or another member of the class has led to new insights. That is why we have discussions.

[By Fri., Sept. 11 at 11 a.m., **the Mods** and **the Rockers** should e-mail me a list of all the grants for which they intend to apply for their dissertation research, whether this semester or in the future, including website addresses if you have them. Indicate which two grant applications you will have the class discuss later in the semester. *If you have a grant application with an earlier deadline than the discussion date for grant applications in the class that you would like your group to discuss, let me know and we’ll work it in.*

Some of you will not be applying for grants this year. This is not a problem. You can either write up a grant application for which you will apply in the future or I can work out an alternative assignment for you to further your progress on your prospectus.]

[By Fri., Sept. 11 at 11 a.m., **the Rockers** will post sections 1,2, and 3 on Blackboard and follow the routine laid out earlier for the **Mods**.]

Sept. 16 **The Rockers** will meet to discuss sections 1,2, and 3.

By Fri., Sept. 18 at 11 a.m., **the Mods** will post revised sections 1,2, and 3, as well as sections 4,5, and 6 on Blackboard. Proceed as you did earlier for sections 1,2, and 3. Make comments on sections 4,5, and 6, although we will discuss changes in 1,2, and 3 in class. Prepare and distribute comments as before.

Sept. 23 **The Mods** will meet to discuss sections 4,5, and 6 of other **Mod's** proposals (and 1,2, and 3 where appropriate).

[By Fri., Sept. 25 at 11 a.m., **the Rockers** will do as **the Mods** have done.]

Sept. 30 **The Rockers** will convene.

[By Fri., Oct. 2 at 11 a.m., each **Mod** will distribute the information on a grant for which they are applying and their application essay.⁴ If there is any guidance as to what the grant selection committee is looking for, what the selection criteria are, include this. If this information is on the web, provide the address. You do not need to provide filled out forms, transcripts, etc.! Do the two-paragraph comments as before for each **Mod's** proposal.]

Oct. 7 **The Mods** will assemble to discuss their grant applications.

[By Fri., Oct. 9 at 11 a.m., **the Rockers** will do as **the Mods** have done.]

Oct. 14 **The Rockers** will meet to discuss their grant applications.

[By Fri., Oct. 16 at 11 a.m., **the Mods** will post sections 1-8 on Blackboard. Comments will be on all sections.]

Oct. 21 **The Mods** will meet to discuss full drafts

[By Wed., Oct. 21 at 11 a.m., **the Rockers** will post sections 1-8 on Blackboard....]

Oct. 28 **The Rockers** will meet to discuss full drafts

[By Fri., Oct. 30 at 11 a.m., noon, **the Mods** will distribute a second grant application to **the Rockers** (and to the instructor and to their adviser), but not to the other **Mods**. **The Rockers** will provide comments to the **Mod** authors and to the instructor.

Nov. 4 **The Rockers** will meet to discuss the **Mod** grant applications. Each individual **Mod** will be assigned a time to appear to face the **Rockers**.

[By Fri., Nov. 6 at 11 a.m., the **Rockers** will distribute a second grant application to **the Mods**....]

⁴ For a good essay on writing a fellowship application, see http://fellowships.ssrc.org/art_of_writing_proposals/

Nov. 11 **The Mods** will meet to discuss the **Rockers'** applications. Each individual **Rocker** will be assigned a time to appear to face the **Mods**.

[By Fri., Nov. 13 at 11 a.m., **the Mods** will post their completed prospectuses on Blackboard for **the Rockers** (and provide one to their adviser). (The **Mods** are not expected to read these.) **The Rockers** will provide comments to the **Mod** authors and to the instructor.

Nov. 18 **The Rockers** will get together to discuss **the Mods'** prospectuses. Each **Mod** will be assigned a time to commune with **the Rockers**.

[By Fri., Nov. 20 at 11 a.m., **the Rockers** will post their completed prospectuses on Blackboard for **the Mods** (and to the instructor and to their advisor). (The **Rockers** are not expected to read these.) **The Mods** will provide comments to **the Rocker** authors and to the instructor.

Dec. 2 **The Mods** will get together to discuss **the Rockers'** prospectuses. Each **Rocker** will be assigned a time to appear to commune with **the Mods**.

Dec. 9 at noon. By this date, each student should have completed a copy of their Mowry grant proposal and reviewed it with their advisor (but other students do not need to read this). I'd be pleased to look them over, but this is not necessary. [If your advisor suggests you hold off on the Mowry proposal until after the prospectus defense, arrangements can be made with the DGS to defer this application and you do not need to submit it for this class.]

Dec. 11 at noon. A paper copy of the prospectus is due to the adviser and to the instructor in their boxes.