History 905: Dissertation Design (Spring 2015) [Nov. 2014 draft; slight changes could be made]

(Tues 5:00 to 7:30 in Hamilton 570)

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History 905 is designed to enable students to write a strong dissertation prospectus. Although you will likely not defend your prospectus until next academic year, we ask you to write a full prospectus now to see what will be involved in pursuing and completing your dissertation. You will continue to work on your prospectus until your defense and in some ways until you defend your dissertation. A good prospectus is a living document.

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. Meet regularly with your adviser(s). Students will frequently meet in writing groups, the Mods and the Rockers, each composed of about 8 students. Some will share your field of study, others not. 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 than to have them muted now.

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1 Every student will research funding opportunities for dissertation research this semester. However, if you decide to apply for funding to support pre-dissertation research this summer and would like the instructor and/or the class to comment on your application proposal, let me know. Be aware that these applications may have early deadlines.

2 I sit on a lot of Ph.D. committees and can say that not only are projects different (and therefore require different kinds of answers to questions such as “Is my historiography section detailed enough?” or “Is this what I should call my methodology?”), but the way these questions should be answered is handled differently by different advisors as well.
only to appear later 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, as well as the instructor’s evaluation of the quality of your critiques of other students’ work in both writing and discussion.

Mods

WHAT IS A PROSPECTUS?³

³ 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.
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 put together 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 accommodate this within the structure of the course. 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.


3. Topic, Questions, and Rationale. What are you writing about? (This is your topic.) What is not known about it? (This is your question.) Why do we 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—an hint of what I think the answers will be), in order to persuade you to think differently about issues of large import (my rationale). It is not enough to show that your subject has not been studied before. 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. For the prospectus, the overview may be quite compact or not present; it is often a case of presenting succinctly one overarching question that situates your work. (How you handle this is generally a matter of the dissertation topic and the adviser’s suggestions.) The historiography of your specific topic should present clearly what has been done, what directions the field is taking (and why research is taking this direction and not others), what needs to be done, and why—and how your project forwards the field by addressing 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 been done before. You may want to discuss only the major and most relevant works and append a longer bibliography. The most effective historiography leads clearly to your research project and convinces the reader that this is where the field should go and that you are taking it there. (5-7 pages)
5. Theory and Method.* Here, you outline the research strategies, methods, and theoretical frameworks that will help you answer the questions posed in earlier sections. (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.) “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. “Methods” might include statistical analysis, oral history, ethnography, archival research, and readings of visual images and material objects. 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.\footnote{If you plan to do interviews, go to the Institutional Research Board website: \url{http://ohre.unc.edu/forms.php}. You’ll need their authorization. You can start by taking their on-line course to get certified.}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Do you put your fingers up in the shape of a cross when you hear “theory and method”?
  \item Other answers I’ve given to questions about theory and methodology that have helped students…Theory is what you use to come up with good questions, ones that help you interpret the past in new ways. Method is what you do once you’ve posed your questions. The key to method is to recognize that no sources were created with the intention of answering your questions and hypotheses. Many records, traces, etc., exist, but you are the person who is making these objects something which can answer your questions and hypotheses. Most records don’t know they are sources until you tell them. But that’s only the first step. Now that you’ve identified a record as a source, how are you going to make it talk? Jack Bauer has his methods, but you’ll want to lay out your own.
\end{itemize}

\footnote{It is precisely the empirical element of historical research that both makes historians wary of the t-word and the m-word, and but also offers them unparalleled opportunities to contest theories and methodologies, or develop new facets of them. Say it loud and say it proud. I'm an historian.}

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. 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 the final product. Some students find it helpful to provide titles of chapters with a brief explanation of the contents of each. Discuss what would be most helpful for you with your advisor.

8. Time table. What are your research plans for this summer? Where will you apply for funding? What are the application deadlines? 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 eighteen months after your oral exams (the defense of the dissertation proposal). At this point, you will 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 (if you wrote one); (c) a revised timeline, 8

8For a good essay on writing a fellowship application, read the downloadable essay at http://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/7A9CB4F4-815F-DE11-BD80-001CC477EC70/ Before your defense of your dissertation prospectus (oral exams) (though not necessarily for this class), you should map out your Mowry Dissertation Fellowship proposal and review it with your adviser. My advice is to get this approved at your defense, and then present it to the DGS. For more information on the Mowry, go to the department’s website.
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.

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Rockers

**What you need to know to understand the schedule:**

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

--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), other faculty and graduate students, and me if you need guidance.

--Writing the prospectus is an on-going project. Over the course of the semester, revisit sections you’ve already written. As your project develops—and it will—you will want to revise earlier sections to fit your refined project.

--When you submit materials, include all the elements you’ve previously done, whether or not you have revised it since the last submission of your materials. Submit your materials on the Sakai Forum site for the course. **However students are expected to read only the newly submitted material unless the submitting student instructs them otherwise.**
Most weeks during the semester, you will be writing and submitting via this Sakai Forum site a comment about the material of each one of either the Mods or the Rockers (as explained in the schedule below). I realize this is a significant time commitment. I do it because it ensures that all read their colleagues’ work closely before each meeting and because the receipt of these comments is valuable to the writer and spurs discussion. These comments can take the form of a short paragraph or a couple of individual sentences raising issues or asking questions, i.e., “I don’t think you explain the importance of your project. You start to on the top of p. 3, but leave us hanging and when you return to the issue on p. 5, it seems like you’ve shifted your focus from x to y” or “You say you will contest Hadley Häagan-Dazs’ argument, but don’t make clear what this argument is (p. 2) or how your extensive examination of the historical experience of religious minorities in Denmark (pp. 5-7) figures into this project.” Don’t be shy about breaking rule 101 of student solidarity (“Never criticize a bro or sis in front of a prof.”). Your peers will benefit from hearing these concerns now, not in the department cenotaph where oral exams are held or when a member of a fellowship committee or search committee doesn’t get it, that it each of you are devoting your life to explaining.

--I have divided students into two groups, the Mods and the Rockers. Most class sessions are for only one gang. The exceptions are Mar. 3, Mar. 17, Apr. 14 and Apr. 21, when Mods or Rockers will meet and members of the other group will come in for individual discussion of their work.

-- We will begin the discussion of each individual’s work by having that individual summarize briefly the response in other students’ comments 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. Students 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. This is why we have discussions.

Schedule

Week of Jan. 13 Individual Meetings with Don Reid. We will not meet as a class this week. I will arrange meetings to talk to each of you about your project on either Jan. 8 or Jan. 13. Your assignment for this week is to ask an ABD in your field (however you define this) or an ABD to whom your adviser directs you for a copy of their prospectus and to read it.

Jan. 20 The Mods will submit prospectus parts 1, 2 and 3 on the Sakai site by noon on Sat., Jan. 17. The Mods will read the other Mods’ work and post a response (see above on p. 5) by Mon., Jan. 19 at 5 p.m. In class, the Mods will discuss the work of each Mod.
Jan. 27 The **Rockers** will submit prospectus parts 1, 2 and 3 on the Sakai site by noon on Sat., Jan. 24. The **Rockers** will read the other **Rockers’** work and post a response by Mon., Jan. 26 at 5 p.m. In class, the **Rockers** will discuss the work of each **Rocker**.

Feb. 3 Some of you may feel more prepared to write part 4, others part 5. The **Mods** will submit either prospectus part 4 or part 5 by noon on Sat., Jan. 31. The **Mods** will read the other **Mods’** work and post a response by Mon., Feb. 2 at 5 p.m. In class, the **Mods** will discuss the work of each **Mod**.

Feb. 10 Some of you may feel more prepared to write part 4, others part 5. The **Rockers** will submit either prospectus part 4 or part 5 by noon on Sat., Feb. 7. The **Rockers** will read the other **Rockers’** work and post a response by Mon., Feb. 9 at 5 p.m. In class, we will discuss the work of each **Rocker**.

Feb. 17 The **Mods** will post the part they did not post before by Sat., Feb. 14 at noon. Each **Mod** will post a response by Mon., Feb. 16 at 5 p.m. In class, the **Mods** will discuss the work of each **Mod**.

The **Mods** should meet this week with their advisers and discuss parts 1-5 of their prospectuses. I will ask each adviser to email her/his thoughts to me on your prospectus to date.

Feb. 24 The **Rockers** will post the part they did not post before by Sat., Feb. 21 at noon. Each **Rocker** will post a response by Mon., Feb. 23 at 5 p.m. In class, the **Rockers** will discuss the work of each **Rocker**.

The **Rockers** should meet this week with their advisers and discuss parts 1-5 of their prospectuses. I will ask each adviser to email her/his thoughts on your prospectus to date.

Mar. 3 The **Mods** should post their revised sections 1-5 by Fri., Feb. 27 at noon. The **Rockers** will read the **Mods’** work and each will post a response to each of the **Foxes’** work by Mon., Mar. 2 at 5 p.m. The **Rockers** will come to class at the usual time. Each **Fox** will be assigned a time to come to class for a discussion of their work.

Mar. 17 The **Rockers** should post their revised sections 1-5 by Fri., March 13 at noon [This is during spring break. Plan accordingly.] The **Mods** will read the **Rockers’** work and each will post a response to each of the **Rockers’** work by Mon., Mar. 16 at 5 p.m. The **Mods** will come to class at the usual time. Each **Rocker** will be assigned a time to come to class for a discussion of their work.

Mar. 24 The **Mods** will post prospectus parts 6, 7, and 8 on the Sakai site by noon on Sat., Mar 21. The **Mods** will read the other **Mods’** work and post a response by Mon. Mar. 24 at 5 p.m. In class, the **Mods** will discuss the work of each **Mod**.
In section 8, discuss your research plans for this summer and for the following year (when you will also be preparing for your written exams). You should also map out briefly a schedule for completion of your dissertation, but don’t devote too much time to this. It is a way to help you see if you have a realistic time table.

Mar. 31 The Rockers will post prospectus parts 6, 7, and 8 on the Sakai site by noon on Sat., Mar. 28. The Rockers will read the other Rockers’ work and post a response by Mon., Mar. 30 at 5 p.m. In class, the Rockers will discuss the work of each Rocker.

See the paragraph on section 8 above.

Apr. 7 No class meeting. All students should post a complete draft of sections 1-8 on the Sakai web site and submit one to your adviser by Mon., Apr. 6 at 5 p.m. All students should arrange in advance a meeting with your adviser this week to discuss the prospectus. You should be in regular contact with your adviser throughout the semester, but this is a chance for the adviser to suggest any changes to the completed prospectus. I will ask each adviser to email her/his thoughts to me on your prospectus.

Apr. 14 Rockers meet. Rockers will read Mods’ drafts and submit responses on them by Sat., Apr. 11 at noon. The Rockers will discuss each of the Mods’ drafts.

If a Rocker has made substantial changes in her/his draft by Sat., Apr. 11 at noon, s/he can post the revised draft by then email and I will tell the class to read the revised draft and comment on it for the next week.

Apr. 21 Mods meet. Mods will read Rockers’ drafts and post responses on them by Sat., April 18 at noon. The Mods will discuss each of the Rockers’ drafts.

Apr. 28 By noon, a hard copy of the final version is due to both Don Reid and to the adviser (unless your adviser would prefer an electronic copy).