

A Guide to the Preparation of a DPhil Thesis Prospectus

School of International Studies

Begin with a short paragraph, stating

- (a) the central problem which you intend to tackle;
- (b) the type of analysis which you hope to employ (theoretical, empirical, historical, etcetera); and
- (c) the "original" contribution which the thesis will make to knowledge in the field.

The rest of the prospectus essentially expands on (a), (b) and (c). In so doing, the following check-list of points may be helpful:

1. have you clearly delineated your central "problem", "question", "hypothesis", etcetera, in contrast to a "topic", "subject", "area"? If your topic is the toothpick industry in Brabant, have you an answer to the cynical query: So what?; What about the toothpick industry in Brabant?
2. if your thesis is entirely theoretical, have you explained why you will not or cannot venture into empirical applications?
3. if your thesis is largely empirical, have you explained the nature of the data which you will analyse? Are they published data, or data that you will raise yourself? If published data, where are they published? If you intend to produce your own data, are you competent in social survey methods and computer science techniques? If not, have you taken steps to acquire the competency? Courses are available in the University which may help you in these areas.
4. if your thesis draws on other disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, etcetera, are you competent in these fields and, if not, have you taken steps to acquire the competency? How will you avoid entering so heavily into these other disciplines that the thesis ceases to be one in economics, or international relations, or history, in which case competent supervisors may not be available. (This problem can be circumvented by the choice of appropriate co-supervisors).
5. is the thesis manageable in, say, three years of full-time work? If not, you probably need to cut down the scope of the thesis.
6. have you really explained the nature of your "original" contribution to knowledge which alone distinguishes a DPhil from an MPhil thesis? Clearly, this is impossible without some sort of survey of the literature in your problem area; this survey need not exceed a page or two at this stage, but it ought to be long enough to suggest your general knowledge of previous work.

7. as this may be your first attempt at a large scale piece of writing, are you acquainted with the standard canons of punctuation, footnoting, bibliographical citations, tabular presentation, etcetera? (The Manual of Style, Chicago University Press, 1969, is invaluable here).

8. how long should the prospectus run? Aim for 5-10 pages; make every sentence count and let it be too short rather than too long; you may expect to do 2-3 drafts.

Finally, remember that the prospectus does not bind you to any unalterable plan. In that case, why bother? It is simply that an early commitment to some definite programme of work tends to avoid the two cardinal sins of DPhil theses: excessive length and excessive description at the expense of analysis. It also minimises the tendency of DPhil students to abandon their thesis after several years of floundering about without focus or direction. It pays, therefore, to spend several months hammering out a satisfactory prospectus, satisfactory to you and satisfactory to your supervisor.