Prospectus Guidelines

(This resource is written by Dr. Kenneth Scheve, professor of Political Science and Co-Director of the Leitner Program in International & Comparative Political Economy at Yale University)

The following guidelines will not be appropriate for all dissertation projects but will be for many of them. Talk to your advisers, use your judgment, and make adjustments as necessary. Usually, your prospectus should describe the research question, the theoretical framework for the study, the data or evidence that will be collected, and how you plan to analyze the data to evaluate your theory. Please keep in mind the following suggestions about each of these aspects of a good prospectus:

1. *Research Question*

   • What is the essay about? What specifically are you trying to describe or explain?
   • Is this question significant to an important real world social phenomenon?
   • Will answering the question contribute to a social scientific literature? What's new that we will learn from the study?

2. *Theory*

   • What is your answer to the research question? Why is the answer correct?
   • Could this theory be wrong? Is it stated clearly enough that it could be falsified? What evidence would persuade us that we were wrong?
   • What are the observable implications of the theory? What specific empirical hypotheses does it generate?
   • What are the rival hypotheses?

3. *Data*

   • What data—qualitative or quantitative—are you going to collect in order to evaluate your theory?
   • Are the measures of your theoretical variables valid? Does the information you propose to collect really measure your theoretical concepts?
   • Are the data collection procedures you propose reliable? Could someone replicate the data collection procedures you propose?

4. *Use of Data*

   • How do you plan to use your data to answer the research question?
   • If you are trying to explain some social phenomenon, are the procedures you propose to use going to yield valid causal inferences?
   • Are your estimators of causal effects unbiased? What possible sources of bias could there be in your study?
   • Are there ways that you could make your procedures for making descriptive or - causal inferences more efficient?

5. *Research Plan*

   • What is the timeline for your research activities?
   • How are you going to fund your research?