

## Prospectus Guidelines for MA Literature Students

**Timing the Prospectus:** All students should plan to fulfill the oral exam component of their thesis process the semester before they plan to file their thesis. This is general departmental policy, and it exists for some very good reasons. First and foremost, you will need at least a full semester to complete your thesis. Students who attempt to go through the process of proposing their thesis topics in the same semester in which they wish to file are rarely able to complete their theses by the deadline.

**The Prospectus Process:** The prospectus is a strange genre, for in it you must describe a project that you have yet to actually do. For this reason, writing a prospectus can be frustrating. In order to produce a solid and useful prospectus (that is, for producing writing that you can actually use in the thesis itself), approach the prospectus as an occasion to start doing real thesis work. Think of the prospectus *not* as the provisional starting point of your project, but as a document that records your research and hypotheses about a project on which you have already substantially embarked. This is an effective way to *conceptualize* the prospectus; however, changes to your project may and will occur during the Prospectus Exam and during your committee's revisions. Aim to avoid vague, place-marking language such as "I will look at" or "I will think about" or "I plan to examine/research" in your prospectus: instead, go ahead and *do* some looking, thinking, examining, and research, and then use what you find to articulate your project's overarching, working argument as substantially, specifically, and concretely as possible. Always include a working bibliography. In addition, please plan to give your committee a draft of your prospectus at least two weeks *before* the scheduled date of your oral exam. (Some faculty members may ask to see it earlier or later.) Using the feedback you receive to revise the prospectus will make for an especially successful and useful exam.

**The Prospectus (Oral) Exam:** The prospectus exam is not really an exam; it is a serious conversation with your readers about your project and your plan for completing it. Your readers will want to use the meeting not to catechize you but rather to see how you present your project, what you want to do with it, and to offer you feedback about the underlying ideas and implications of your work. That said, it is fairly common for thesis committees to ask you for additional writing or an additional meeting at the end of the conversation (however, as mentioned above, giving your readers a prospectus draft well in advance of the exam can help the meeting go more smoothly and satisfyingly). If you are asked for additional writing or for an additional meeting, please understand that this is not punitive; your committee simply wants to help you approach the thesis from the best possible place, and to reach the highest level of achievement in your work.

**Looking Ahead:** When thinking about the logistics of completing the thesis, work backwards. Find the date by which you must submit the thesis in its final form, and prepare yourself in advance for the steps you must take to prepare and format your thesis for submission to the university (formatting info here: [www.sfsu.edu/~gradstdy/forms/thesis-guideline.pdf](http://www.sfsu.edu/~gradstdy/forms/thesis-guideline.pdf)). When thinking about your writing schedule, keep in mind that you must submit the full, revised, penultimate copy of your entire thesis to your readers at least three, ideally four weeks before the submission deadline. Additionally, you will want to give your readers chapter drafts as you complete them. Give your readers chapter drafts that are as polished and complete as possible.

**See the Thesis Guidelines for MA Literature Students [handout](#) for more information about the thesis process.**