

Writing Your Prospectus: A Guide^{1 2}
 Higher Education Leadership Ph.D. Program
 Florida Atlantic University

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WORKING DRAFT

To move forward with your prospectus, we ask two key questions: First, do you have a topic that is truly “*dissertatable*”? Secondly, are you ready to enroll in and complete dissertation credits?

Your dissertation prospectus essentially comprises the first two chapters of the dissertation and you can think of it as your research blueprint and the plan that outlines what you want to study, why it matters, and how you will do it. It demonstrates to your advisor, chair and the faculty committee that you have thought carefully about your topic, grounded it in relevant literature and scholarly conversations, and developed a realistic plan for carrying out your research.

Think of the prospectus as a polished draft of the first two chapters of your dissertation. Chapter 1 introduces your study, describes the problem and research questions, explains its significance, and lays out your framework, methodology and more.³ Chapter 2 is an initial draft of your literature review and should demonstrate you have a good grasp on the relevant literature informing your study. Together, these two chapters provide a strong foundation for the rest of the dissertation. While the length of a prospectus can vary, it is often around 40-50 pages⁴. This is not a strict requirement, but it helps you imagine the level of detail and depth expected at this stage.

More than simply meeting a program requirement, the prospectus is your opportunity to gain confidence and direction as you approach the dissertation phase. By the time you finish writing it, you will not only have a clearer sense of your study but also a roadmap to guide you through data collection, analysis, and writing. In many ways, the prospectus marks your transition from coursework to your work as a more independent scholar. The oral exam affords you an opportunity to share your dissertation prospectus and benefit from the insights of the higher education faculty who are dedicated to your success. After you have completed and passed the exam, you will officially select a chair, form a committee with your chair’s guidance, and move to the Ph.D. candidacy stage.

Meeting the Requirements

Before you submit your prospectus, you must complete all coursework for your program, unless your advisor approves an exception. Coursework ensures that you have the theoretical grounding, methodological training, and substantive knowledge needed to take on a dissertation.

¹ This is a guide developed by Higher Education Leadership Ph.D. faculty and is subject to change. It is not intended to be a contract, explicit or implicit.

² Refer to the 2024 ELRM Ph.D. Degree Policies and Procedures from Application to Completion about the process.

³ See Appendix A for suggested headings.

⁴ The suggested length is not inclusive of references and appendices.

You must also secure the approval of your advisor and/or intended chair⁵, who will assess whether your study is appropriately scoped, feasible, and aligned with the program's and field's standards. Many students have a dissertation chair in mind and may change from their initial program advisor to the desired chair before sitting for the prospectus exam. In practice, this means you should be in regular communication with your Higher Education faculty throughout the prospectus drafting process. You are expected to keep your advisor informed of your progress. Faculty do not recommend you sit for the exam during the same semester you are enrolled in the Dissertation Prospectus class. See Appendix B for the milestone sequencing for PhD students.

The Structure of Your Prospectus

This section of the guide provides an overview of how to structure your prospectus. A full list of the required headings is provided in Appendix A. The remainder of this section expands on each heading in more detail to guide you through the process.

The document begins with a **title page**, which lists your dissertation title (a working title is fine), your name, program, chair, and date of submission.

Following this is an **abstract** of about 150 to 250 words. The abstract should briefly summarize the study, stating the problem you are addressing, your purpose, your research questions, the framework guiding your work, and your methodology. Think of the abstract as a snapshot of your entire project.

Chapter 1 introduces your research study. It typically opens with an **introduction** (one to two pages), offering context and citing sources that help the reader understand the problem. From this background emerges the **problem statement** (about two pages), which makes clear the issue that your research addresses. The problem statement is followed by the **purpose of the study** (about one page), a concise presentation of what you intend to accomplish through your study. Next, you will introduce your **research questions**, which are informed by your purpose; they represent the specific inquiries you will answer in order to fulfill your study's goal(s).

The next part of **Chapter 1** highlights **the significance of the study** (about one page). Here, you explain why your work matters, not only for scholarship but also for practice. A strong significance section demonstrates how your study fills a gap in the literature, offers new insights, or addresses issues that remain unresolved.

If a **theoretical or conceptual framework** is used, it should be presented in this section (about two pages). This section identifies the theory or framework that grounds your study, explains why it is appropriate, and shows how it will guide your data collection and analysis. You should cite both the original theorists and more recent scholars who have applied the framework in related contexts. For example, if you are using Validation Theory, you would cite foundational authors like Laura Rendón, as well as more recent applications of this theory in higher education.

⁵ Chair is used interchangeably with “co-chair” Advisor is used to reference your initial program advisor.

Chapter 1 also includes a short section on your **methodology** (about two to three pages). Here, you will describe the type of study you are doing (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods) and why this approach makes sense. You will explain where your study will take place, who will be involved, and how you plan to recruit participants. Be sure to describe how you will collect your data (for example, through interviews, surveys, or observations).

The last components of your chapter 1 should include: discussion of your study's **limitations and delimitations** (about ½ to one page), definitions of your **study's key terms**, and a short **summary** of Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 is your **literature review**. This chapter shows that you have engaged with the key conversations in your field and that you know where your study fits within those conversations. Please contact your chair to learn their expectations about the literature review. The chapter often begins with a roadmap paragraph, introducing the reader to what the review will cover.

The **introduction** to the literature review highlights patterns across the scholarship, such as recurring themes, debates, or contradictions. The **body** of the review synthesizes the literature, organizing it into categories that allow meaningful comparisons. For example, you might compare studies that used different research designs, highlight agreements and disagreements among scholars, or trace how ideas have evolved over time.

The literature review **concludes** by summarizing the most important insights and identifying gaps. Finally, you **connect these gaps** to your own study, showing how your project will extend or challenge existing work. In total, your literature review may typically be about 10-15 pages (See Appendix C for examples of how the structure of a literature review may develop over time).

Chapters 1 and 2 – AI & Originality Please remember that chapters 1 and 2 of your dissertation prospectus must represent your own original work. While AI tools may be used for minor tasks such as formatting or editing for grammar and clarity, they should not be used to generate the substance of your writing. The ideas, analysis, synthesis of literature, and articulation of your research problem, purpose, and framework must come directly from you. Any use of AI to write content beyond basic editing support undermines the integrity of your scholarship. All written materials will be reviewed through TurnItIn to verify originality, and failure to produce original work may result in not only significant revisions but also failure of the qualifying exams.

Chapters 1 and 2 should be grounded in and supported by the literature, demonstrating alignment with existing scholarship and research. The only section where you may incorporate your personal experiences is in the “Role of the Researcher” and/or “Positionality” section, if those sections are included in your prospectus.

Helpful Tips:

Writing a prospectus can feel daunting but breaking it into smaller steps helps. Begin by drafting pieces of Chapter 1 that are most clear to you, sometimes that is the background, other

times it is the purpose and research questions. Remember that your prospectus evolves from your seminar concept paper. Do not worry about getting everything perfect at once; your draft will evolve through feedback.

Always keep alignment in mind. Your problem statement should connect directly to your purpose, which should flow into your research questions, which should be answerable given your framework and methodology. If any of these elements feel disconnected, it is a sign to revisit your design.

Think about feasibility. It is tempting to design an ambitious study, but a dissertation is meant to be completed within a finite period. Choose a project that is focused enough to complete in the time you have, while still contributing meaningfully to your field.

Clarity is also crucial. Faculty read many prospectuses, so write in straightforward language. Avoid jargon when possible and define terms carefully when you need them. Use your citations to show you know the literature, but do not overwhelm your writing with long strings of sources.

Please ensure your paper is properly formatted. It should adhere to [APA 7 style](#), including the correct heading levels (examples can be found [here](#)). The entire paper must be double-spaced. Do not label headings with numbers or letters, and be sure to insert page numbers in the top-right corner of the header.

Finally, seek feedback early and often. Share drafts with your course professors, advisor, chair (if one has been selected), peers, and/or writing groups. Feedback is invaluable for catching unclear sections, strengthening arguments, and ensuring that you are on the right track.

Remember that the prospectus is a plan, not the final word. Your study may evolve as you go through the prospectus stage, on to the proposal, and then collect and analyze data. The prospectus gives you a strong starting point, and flexibility is part of the research process.

When you pass the Qualifying Examination (Prospectus Exam) you will officially be admitted to Ph.D. Candidacy, and you are ready to enroll in dissertation credits.⁶

⁶ Dissertation credits are offered in the Fall and Spring only. Dissertation Seminar is offered in the Summer. Both count as dissertation credits toward degree requirements.

Prospectus Rubric

These are some of the elements faculty look for to determine if a student's prospectus shows their preparation to advance to the defense stage. Overriding questions: 1) Does this student have a study that is worthy and *dissertatable*? 2) Is the student ready to enroll in dissertation credits?

Category	Outstanding (4)	Proficient (3)	Needs Improvement (2)	Not Ready (1)
Clarity and Focus of Topic	Topic is clearly articulated, well-justified, framed within the higher ed leadership; addresses a problem or gap.	Topic is stated and appropriate, with some justification; may need minor refinement.	Topic is vague, too broad/narrow, or lacks a strong rationale or focus on higher ed leadership.	Topic is unclear, missing, or disconnected from higher ed leadership.
Problem Statement & Purpose	Problem statement is specific, compelling, logically leads to purpose; aligns with research questions.	Problem and purpose are generally clear, with some refinement needed.	Problem is vague/disconnected; purpose not well defined.	Problem and purpose are missing, confusing, or irrelevant.
Research Questions	Precise, researchable, aligned with problem/purpose, clearly linked to framework and methods.	Mostly clear and researchable; minor alignment issues.	Unfocused, too many/too few, or misaligned with study design.	Absent or inappropriate for the study.
Theoretical/Conceptual Framework (<i>if applicable</i>)	Thoroughly explained, well-justified, integrated throughout; citations provided.	Described with adequate detail; some alignment issues.	Mentioned but underdeveloped or loosely connected.	Missing, inappropriate, or not connected to research.
Literature Review	Comprehensive, organized, critical synthesis; clearly identifies gaps and situates study.	Adequate coverage with some synthesis; gaps identified but could be stronger.	Descriptive but lacks synthesis, organization, or rationale.	Missing, very limited, or irrelevant.
Methodology	Clearly described, justified, aligned with questions; includes critical information like site, participants, data collection, analysis, etc.	Appropriate and mostly clear; some details need elaboration.	Incomplete, lacking justification or necessary details or partially aligned to study's design.	Missing, unclear, or inappropriate.
Scholarly Writing & Organization	Clear, professional, well-organized, free of major errors; coherent chapters.	Generally clear and organized, minor errors.	Uneven writing with frequent errors/organizational issues.	Unclear, disorganized, or too many errors.
Readiness Indicators	Demonstrates deep understanding, readiness to defend study decisions.	Shows general understanding, can explain most choices.	Struggles to articulate rationale for design/framework.	Minimal understanding of study components.

Appendix A: Prospectus Paper Headings

Title Page

Abstract

Chapter 1:

Background/Introduction

Problem Statement

Purpose of the Study

Research Questions

Significance

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework(s) (If applicable)

Methodology

Limitations and Delimitations

Key Terms and Definitions

Summary

Note: If your prospectus includes the “Role of the Researcher” and/or “Positionality” sections, please add to Chapter 1.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review (Consult your dissertation prospectus professor, advisor and/or chair regarding specific expectations for the breadth and depth of your literature review)

Appendix B: PhD Program Milestones Timeline⁷

1. **Develop Concept Paper (As you progress through coursework)**
 - Drafting and refining the concept paper occurs alongside your coursework, and the paper will serve as the foundation for Chapter 1 of your prospectus and dissertation.
2. **Complete Coursework**
 - Finish all required coursework before moving into the prospectus and qualifying exam stages.
3. **Evolve Concept Paper into Prospectus**
 - Expand your concept paper into a full prospectus, which includes:
 - Chapter 1: Introduction
 - Chapter 2: Literature Review
4. **Reviews of the Prospectus Prior to the Exam**
 - Share your prospectus with the professor teaching the Prospectus seminar, advisor and/or chair for feedback and approval prior to applying to sit for the exam.
5. **Qualifying Exam (Prospectus Exam) – Submission and Defense**
 - Once your advisor approves, schedule, submit⁸, and sit for the qualifying exam.
 - Submit the form and Prospectus to the Department (details are on the web)
 - *Defend your Prospectus* during an oral exam
 - Successful completion advances you to doctoral candidacy.
6. **Advance to Candidacy**
 - After passing the qualifying exam, you are officially a doctoral candidate. Congratulations!
 - You need to recruit a chair first and then a committee prior to submission of the candidacy form. The candidacy form is a prerequisite for enrollment in dissertation credits or the dissertation seminar.
7. **Dissertation Proposal Preparation**
 - Enroll in dissertation credits and/or seminar with your dissertation chair.
 - Write chapters 1, 2, and 3, which is the dissertation proposal. During this phase you will focus much attention on chapter 3 methodology and polishing chapters 1 and 2.
 - Follow the guidance of your chair about protocols regarding communications with dissertation committee members and their feedback.
 - Once your chair approves, you may schedule your dissertation proposal defense. Follow the guidance of your chair.
 - Preparation for the proposal defense often includes a rehearsal with your chair.
 - *Defend your dissertation proposal.*

⁷ Refer to the departmental 2024 Ph.D. Degree Policies and Procedures policy for additional information.
<https://www.fau.edu/education/academicdepartments/el/higher-education/documents/elrm-degree-policies-app-to-completion-phd.pdf>

⁸ A form and the Prospectus paper must be submitted by the deadline to sit for the exam. The exam is only offered Fall and Spring semesters.

- Once you pass your dissertation proposal defense, you may move to the data collection phase (if approved by IRB). Do not collect data before the proposal has been defended and approved.

8. Collect and Analyze Data

- Submit for IRB approval, if appropriate. Your chair will be the PI, not you.
- Once you have approval to collect data, you may do so.
- Analyze data. Consult your chair about protocols for communications of findings to methodologists and other committee members.

9. Write Dissertation

- Write chapters 4 and 5.
- Work very closely with your chair.

10. Defend and Graduate

- When your chair agrees you are ready to defend the dissertation, follow the communications protocols outlined with your chair regarding communications with the committee members.
- The dissertation defense must be announced and scheduled. You will not announce the defense as your chair will do that, so work closely with your chair.
- Often, a rehearsal is completed with your chair prior to the defense.
- Review and comply with the Graduate College guidelines for submission of your final dissertation for format reviews, originality checks, and other expectations.
- Successfully *defend your dissertation*.
- Budget time for post-defense revisions and submission of the dissertation for reading by the department chair and deans in your timeline.
- Work very closely with your dissertation chair through this stage, including the post-defense stage.
- Complete all graduation requirements and confer your degree.

Appendix C: Guide for Components of a Literature Review

Search process section: includes how you went about searching for, collecting, and analyzing relevant literature (credible sources should be what is mostly cited, like peer-reviewed journal articles, empirical books). This is also known as your search process--what databases or search engines did you access, did you select any filters when searching, what were your search terms or keywords, what inclusion criteria and exclusion did you rely on during your search. (This should be about 2-3 pages before your actual review. Your literature review should situate your dissertation topic within relevant scholarly conversations.

Introduction of your literature review (after your 2-3 page search process): Begin by outlining the broad topic, issue, or area of concern so that readers have a clear context for the literature review. Highlight key patterns in existing scholarship, such as recurring themes, disagreements in theory or methods, inconsistencies in evidence or conclusions, or areas that remain underexplored. You may also call attention to a specific problem or perspective that makes the review timely and relevant. In addition, clarify your purpose for conducting the review, describe the approach you will use to analyze and compare sources, explain how the review will be organized (e.g., by theme, method, or time), and, when appropriate, justify why certain studies are included or excluded.

Body of your literature review: In the main section, organize and synthesize the literature into categories that make meaningful comparisons possible. For example, by research design (qualitative versus quantitative), by author conclusions, by stated goals, etc. Summarize individual works, only if they are foundational and important to your study. These are more influential or relevant studies that deserve greater detail, while less critical ones can be brief. Use strong opening sentences at the start of each paragraph, provide clear transitions throughout, and conclude sections with short statements that explain why the comparisons or analyses matter.

Conclusion of your literature review: Wrap up by synthesizing the most important contributions of the literature to the field, maintaining the focus set in your introduction. Assess the current state of knowledge by identifying methodological weaknesses, theoretical gaps, research gaps, or other limitations that need attention. Finally, situate your review in a larger scholarly or professional context, showing how the topic connects to broader questions in higher education leadership.