

The Prospectus

A research and writing prospectus (or essay prospectus) is a document in which you define a research question or problem, establish its significance within a disciplinary or interdisciplinary context, and then explain how you plan to complete the research required to address the question or problem. In the case of literary research, the prospectus will also indicate the general shape you expect your analytical argument to take. A prospectus is not the same as a thesis statement or an outline, but it may gesture in the direction of provisional versions of either or both.

Keep in mind that the prospectus details a *plan* and provides a *rationale* for this plan. It does not have to contain a comprehensive account of the final product. While you should not depart radically from what you state as your basic intent in the prospectus, the plan you lay out will almost inevitably require some modification (deepening, refining, narrowing, expanding) as your research, analysis, and writing unfold.

The prospectus is not an assignment you ought to complete hastily just to satisfy a course requirement. By the time you get to the prospectus stage, you should be able to articulate a clear, distinctive topic or an approach to an established topic (if the latter, you should be able to provide a responsible account of the history of this topic and something about the new perspective you seek to bring to it). In addition, you should have researched the topic sufficiently to know that it is workable within your time frame (e.g. that there are sufficient resources available to you to complete the analysis and that the scope of the project doesn't exceed the number of pages you expect to produce or the number of weeks afforded to you for the work).

Essential Sections of the Prospectus

1. **Proposed Title:** Provide a tentative, but descriptive and compelling title for the essay you will write. Of course, this will be subject to change.
2. **Topic and Purpose or Objectives:** Explain your research question or problem, including the objectives you hope to accomplish in your research and writing and the perspective you plan to take in the analysis. Explain the critical or historical parameters within which you plan to work, and discuss your theoretical or conceptual framework (ie. identify and discuss the key ideas or claims advanced by others that you plan to use in your essay; name the major figures to whom your plan is indebted; describe the critical dialogue or debate to which you plan to contribute etc.). Provide your tentative thesis if you have one.
3. **Research Void:** Provide a rationale for the specific project you have undertaken. For example, has your question been neglected or inadequately considered by other critics? Perhaps you seek to provide a new context or framework in which to explore an existing topic. Think about this as your first opportunity to take on some of the scholarship around your topic by identifying one of its collective blind spots. What have scholars who have treated your primary text or critical question *not* paid attention to that you will?
4. **Organizational Framework:** Describe the major sections you plan to include in your essay. This section of the prospectus will resemble a general structural outline but may well change as the argument takes shape. This is your first opportunity to think about how you want to structure your essay.
5. **Preliminary Bibliography:** List the major primary and secondary works you intend to use in your research. Annotation of the bibliography is not necessary.

The following is an example of a sound (if imperfect) prospectus.

Proposed Title: Arthur Symons's *An Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning* and Brigham Young University's Victorian Collection

Topic and Purpose: William Peterson, a literary historian of the London Browning Society, asserts that "It is not at all an exaggeration...to call Arthur Symons's *Introduction to the Study of Browning* the finest book written on Browning's poetry in the Nineteenth century; by comparison, the works of his contemporaries seem filled with pedantry and tedious message-hunting" (151). In the Victorian Collection at Brigham Young University are fourteen of the volumes of Browning's works that Arthur Symons (1865-1945) used for his *An Introduction to the Study of Browning* published by Cassell in 1886. All but three are signed by Symons and contain penciled notes in the margins in Symons's handwriting. The first edition of Symons's study for which these fourteen volumes served as some of the primary sources is also in the Victorian collection. The book's printed dedication is to the novelist George Meredith. The copy is also inscribed "To George Meredith, Esq. from Arthur Symons" and is evidently the presentation copy that Symons gave to Meredith. Symons's introduction to Browning (with its accompanying source volumes) is a valuable document in the history of Browning criticism. By examining the primary sources in the BYU collection and relevant secondary material, I would like to trace briefly the genesis of Symons's work on Browning and to suggest its importance in Browning studies, using an historical/biographical approach.

Research Void: There has been very little research done on the Browning/Symons relationship, and as far as I can determine nothing has been published on the collection of primary materials in the Brigham Young University Library, let alone the light they might shed on the implications that Symons's work may have had for the critical and/or popular reception of Browning's poetry during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Organizational Framework: I plan to include the following major sections in my paper:

- I. Contextualizing discussion of Symons's history as a literary critic, Browning's career and reputation as a poet, and the prevailing theoretical assumptions within literary criticism during the late Nineteenth century.
- II. Description of Symons's interest in Browning and the genesis of his book-length study.
- III. The significance of the primary materials in the BYU collection and Symons's use of these materials in his *An Introduction to the Study of Browning*.
- IV. An assessment of the importance and analytical implications of Symons's work on Browning.

Preliminary Bibliography:

Beckson, Karl, et al. *Arthur Symons: A Bibliography*. Greensboro, U of North Carolina
ELT Press, 1990.

- - - . *Arthur Symons: A Life*. New York: Oxford-Clarendon, 1987.

- - - , and John M. Munro. "Symons, Browning, and the Development of the Modern Aesthetic." *Studies in English Literature* 10 (1970): 687-99.

Browning, Robert. *Aristophanes' Apology*. London: Smith-Elder, 1875.

Peterson, William S. "Arthur Symons as a Browningite." *Review of English Studies*. 19 (May 1968): 148-57.

Symons, Arthur. *An Introduction to the Study of Browning*. London: Cassell, 1886.