**Prospectus Guidelines and Worksheet**

(adapted from a handout by Matthew Ocheltree)

A **Prospectus** is a statement of your **plan for pursuing a research project**. It is not only a statement of your paper **topic** (*what* you plan to investigate), but also a statement of your research **strategy** (*how* you plan to investigate). It should raise literary, critical, and theoretical questions, explain how you hope to answer these questions, and suggest a hypothesis—perhaps not a definitive thesis just yet, but a hunch as to what you may end up arguing after you’ve done some research. A good prospectus will be **bold in ambition** but also **narrow in scope**: you want to pursue a project that is manageable in the space and time you have before you, while making the case that there are important stakes to this project just the same.

In the end, the final paper you write may look quite different from the one you imagined in the Prospectus, and that’s completely fine. What matters about the Prospectus is that it gives you **motivation** and **direction**: you should be excited about the questions you pose and you should have a sense of what your next steps will be. The Prospectus, then, doesn’t have to be perfectly structured or perfectly prescient… just make sure it includes the components below.

Before you start your Prospectus, fill out the worksheet below. Even if some of the components get more attention than others in your final written Prospectus, it’ll be good to be able to refer to all these pieces when you start your research.

In this assignment, you’re welcome to go over the page limit if you need to (but a concise, comprehensive, two-page prospectus is also great!). The absolutely essential components of the Prospectus are marked with an asterisk (\*).

A. Elements of the Prospectus – *length: 2 pp*:

1. **\*Topic**. What are you going to be writing about? A specific text? An author? A theme from the course? An area in literary theory? A critical debate? A topic often comes from the intersection of a few different terms (e.g. “Der Blinde Junge” and Disability Theory; Gertrude Stein and the history of art collectors in Paris; critical arguments concerning T.S. Eliot’s role behind *Nightwood*). Work out what a few of your terms will be.

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| **Notes from in-class discussion:** | **Personal planning:** |

1. **\*Driving questions or problems.** The key questions that you expect your argument to address may include theoretical dimensions, but they should fundamentally be rooted in a set of literary-critical concerns specific to the text(s) you’ll be analyzing: what aspect or problem of the text(s) does your argument hope to explain? It’s important that the questions you are asking should have more than one reasonable answer: whatever answer you devise should be arguable, such that you have to work to prove your case to the reader.

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1. **\*Primary evidence:** now that you’ve isolated the text(s) you’ll be working on, indicate the key aspects and/or moments that will figure into your analysis. What sort of evidence will you be working with? Which parts of the text(s) are pivotal for your reading? Which ones are particularly problematic or puzzling, and thus demand interpretation? If you are writing a comparative paper, you should consider whether you plan on interweaving your analysis, or treating the texts sequentially (*e.g. perhaps your reading of one text only takes you so far in exploring the problem you’ve laid out and you need the second text to extend or complicate your reading*). Once you’ve surveyed your evidence, the more you can specify your strategy for configuring it to serve your analysis the better. Are there other types of primary evidence, besides course texts, that you’ll want to use?

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1. **\*Secondary evidence.** You don’t need to know just yet what secondary sources you’ll be using, as you’ll figure that out when you create the Annotated Bibliography, but you should start thinking about the search itself. What will you look for, when you want to see what critics or theorists or historians or other scholars have said about your topic? Can you divide up aspects of your topic into different research categories?

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1. **Critical and methodological approach.** We’ve seen different strategies for answering big questions and problems in our critical readings, sometimes at the exclusion of other possible strategies. How will you focus your research? Now that you’ve imagined what kinds of sources you will look for, what makes these the best choices for your project? What methods might be distracting or irrelevant (and why)? Whom do you imagine as your critical allies or your opponents? Is your argument going to be based on close-reading, structural reading, comparison, history, or some other dimension?

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1. **\*Provisional thesis**. Try to articulate as clearly and concisely as possible, in affirmative terms, a thesis that addresses the driving questions discussed above. You can think about it a “hypothesis,” if you like—subject to change pending further research. If you can do this in one sentence, great; often a “thesis statement” for a longer paper such as the Junior Essay requires a few sentences to elaborate, which is fine, too. If the paper is going to be a comparative one, make sure your thesis addresses both texts or at least clarifies how you view the relationship between them for the purposes of your argument.

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1. **Potential counter-argument(s).** Most good essays find ways incorporate meaningful counter-arguments. These can arise from the text(s) or from the reading of another critic. It’s good to think about possible objections to address throughout the body of your essay, but you should also think about what an intelligent reader would use as a counter-argument to your main thesis. You may not have found this yet, but it is certainly worth keeping in mind.

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1. **\*Stakes**. What are the “stakes” of your argument beyond our understanding of the specific text(s) under consideration? Are they literary-historical, theoretical, etc.? You want to give a sense of the importance and larger implications of your work—why it *matters—*without overreaching into grandiose claims. Often, the concluding section of a longer paper will introduce a final turn that emerges logically from what has come before but also opens up a **new horizon**. The attempt to answer the initial set of questions raises new ones; this doesn’t mean you should literally end the paper with a bevy of question marks—in fact, you probably shouldn’t!—but the view from the top of the mountain is inevitably different from the view at the base. You can find ways to gesture toward these stakes throughout the paper, in topic sentences and elsewhere, but you can also engage them directly at the beginning and end.

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