

## From Prospectus to Research Essay

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I prepared a one-page guideline with this title for the historiography courses I taught at Michigan State University. Wording varied slightly from the sample below, depending on whether the history workshop was on Charles Darwin's *Beagle Diary* written during the voyage, or my adaptation of Jack Hexter's historiography course I took at Yale—the Goodwin-Fortescue dispute about parliamentary privilege during the first year of James I's reign as King of England.

### The Research Prospectus

#### Introduce Your Topic

What is your topic? Then state why you are interested in this topic. Add a few comments about your personal background and academic training that suggest your potential perspective on this topic and that may help your instructor/committee assess the likelihood that you will carry the proposed project to a successful conclusion.

#### Literature Review

Briefly situate your topic among recent trends in the scholarly literature found in the packet of secondary readings, reserve readings, and interpretive literature assigned to date. Consider the following questions: Is this a topic about which relatively little has been done? Or a common topic that you wish to re-examine aspects of? For example, does your initial survey of assigned primary sources suggest problems

### The Research Essay

#### Preface

Describe the topic and briefly explain why it interests you.

#### Introduction

1. However you begin, end opening paragraph with the broad **historical problem** that has guided your research project.
2. **Literature review**: thematic discussion of scholarly literature that relates to your topic. Make this comprehensive; mention all secondary sources that appear in your bibliography.
3. Briefly describe your **methodology**.
4. The last paragraph of the introduction should contain your **thesis statement**. Use one of the following formats.

If your interpretation is historical continuity: **what** you think happened, **when**, plus **how/why** it came about as you suggest.

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or gaps in the scholarly literature?

Whatever you decide, this is the “literature review” section of the prospectus in which you are expected to clarify what other scholars have **and** have not done on the topic you’re proposing. Organize by themes related to your topic, not individual books/authors; that is, your topic sentences should be substantive, not “author-driven.” Follow parenthetical documentation (author, date, page) guidelines set forth in *Chicago Manual of Style (CMoS)*.

**Please note:** Don’t use this section to portray other scholars as fools or charlatans. If you describe gaps in the literature and/or problematic interpretations, be as civil and respectful about other scholars’ efforts as you would wish them to be about yours.

Conclude the literature review with a succinct formulation of the **historical problem** that will guide your initial research.

### Methodology

How do you plan to research and write about this topic?

### Potential Scholarly Significance

What do you hope to accomplish that other scholars may find significant?

### Bibliography

Follow guidelines in *CMoS*.

If your interpretation is historical change:

From > To  
(Because)

in which **chronology** is embedded in From > To, and (Because) reflects your interpretation of the **cause** and/or **contingent** event.

### Narrative

Substantiation of thesis statement.

1. Use topic sentences as markers of a logical argument.
2. Employ selected evidence, juxtaposed when making comparisons.
3. Analyze/explain how evidence supports each aspect of your thesis, utilizing appropriate historical **context**.

### Afterword

The scholarly significance of your narrative.

### Documentation

Use endnote format as set forth in *CMoS*.

### Bibliography

Follow guidelines in *CMoS*.