Developing the Prospectus

Congratulations on taking the next step in your doctoral journey! All Walden doctoral programs require the completion of a capstone—a doctoral-level dissertation, doctoral study, consulting capstone, or other. The three main milestones in doctoral capstone development are the prospectus, the proposal, and final study. In this video, we will focus on milestone one.

The capstone prospectus is a brief document that serves as the plan for developing your proposal. Walden provides you with a prospectus guidebook outlining the required headings and content, and an assessment rubric for evaluating your prospectus. Also provided are preformatted writing templates for you to use as you write.

The best approach is to type your prospectus within the template itself and re-name the document to something like: “YourName_prospectus_date”. Using a consistent naming system like this from the beginning will help you keep track of your most recent files and avoid possible confusion down the road.

Prospectus requirements often vary by doctoral program, so it’s important to bookmark the Prospectus Quick Links that are presented along with this video and be certain to use your program’s documents throughout your capstone journey.

This is a basic flowchart for developing research design components. Take a moment and read through the steps.

Notice that the very first step in the process is the identification of a discipline-specific research problem. The prospectus has several short sections, but the first, and possibly the most critical section, is the Problem Statement.

The best way to identify a research problem is by reviewing recent research findings, and possibly current practice, related to your area of interest. Keep in mind that there is a difference between a social problem and a research problem. Here is an explanation of those differences.

A social problem involves an issue that affects a specific population or discipline. It is the issue that students see “on the ground” so to speak. The social problem is often what prompts students to think about a topic of interest for their capstone. Usually such a topic is one that students identify with, sometimes having personally experienced some aspect of the problem as it exists in the world. All too often, students want to solve a specific social, organizational, clinical, or practical problem rather than explore a research problem.

A research problem is a focused topic of concern, a condition to be improved upon, or troubling question that is supported in scholarly literature and/or theory. One that you study to understand in more detail, and that can lead to recommendations for resolutions. It is the research problem that drives the rest of the capstone: the purpose, the research questions, and the methodology. It is the research problem that is identified in the Problem Statement of the prospectus.

There are specific requirements for the research problem that together form a type of litmus test, pictured in this graphic. Only when you can answer “yes” to each of these questions have you identified a doctoral-level research problem. These requirements also relate to prospectus rubric standards. As this step is often the most challenging in the research process, be sure to work closely with your
instructor or capstone committee chair on the identification of a doctoral-level research problem. Take a moment to read over this litmus test.

In the prospectus document, the problem statement will include 1-2 paragraphs in which you identify the gap in the literature or practice, with current relevance to your discipline or area of practice, presented along with evidence that the problem is meaningful to the discipline, by providing citations to support this.

The other sections in the prospectus include the purpose, significance, background, framework, research questions, nature of the study, possible types and sources of data, and limitations, challenges, and/or barriers. Don’t worry about figuring out what should be included in each of these sections; the prospectus guidebook includes the details you’ll need in terms of content and length to guide you as you write your prospectus.

In addition to identifying the problem, another challenge you may face as you complete your prospectus is ensuring alignment in your research design. Research design alignment means that all the pieces of the study design match and/or complement one another. For example, the problem must drive the purpose of the study and the research questions. The framework must support the research approach overall. There should be common language throughout, with concepts and theories corresponding with the problem and purpose—meaning that language should be repeated from earlier sections into later sections of the prospectus. As you write, be sure to connect the dots among each section of the prospectus, ensuring alignment throughout. There are resources to assist you with alignment, so be sure to find them in the Quick Links.

Capstone writing is an iterative process. Feedback is part of learning. Students work with their instructor, or their committee chair and second committee member once assigned, on the prospectus document, and all official document reviews take place in the document review portion of MyDR. MyDR can be accessed from a link on the Course Home page of your capstone classroom. In MyDR, you will submit your documents for review by your committee once your committee chair indicates to do so.

The completed prospectus must meet all of your program’s Prospectus Rubric Standards for you to move on to proposal development. In addition, you must complete the Self-Check on Partner Site Masking because the default for Walden capstones is to mask the identity of the partner organization. Be sure to check out the guidance document for this and the other key resources you’ll need, provided in the Prospectus Quick Links.

Best of luck to you as you develop your prospectus and throughout your doctoral journey!