A prospectus, literally, is a "seeing ahead" or a forward view. For purposes of this course, a prospectus is a written, single-page plan of action for a critical / interpretive essay project you plan to pursue. A good prospectus represents in concentrated form your advance thinking, planning, and prewriting of your essay. It should accomplish the following tasks, as clearly and cogently as possible:

- Identify the work and author about whom you will write.
- Define the particular interpretive issue, problem, or question your essay will address.
- Describe your intended angle of approach and your writing strategy.
- State your preliminary hypothesis about your essay's thesis/conclusion, if you have one.

You can't possibly know exactly, of course, what all your findings will be before you've completed the thinking, writing, research, and revision for the essay itself. But you should nevertheless approach the task of writing the prospectus as an interpretive task. The more the prospectus embodies serious advance thinking and planning of your project, the more likely it is to give you good guidance as you continue the project. In other words, use the prospectus as a first major step forward in your project rather than as a rote exercise.

Here are some student-written examples, each of which takes a slightly different approach to its project:

Example I.

In *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955*, Richard H. King describes what he calls "the Southern family romance": a "collective fantasy which made up the 'structure of feeling'" of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Southern culture. The Southern family romance, King writes, "constituted the values, attitudes, and beliefs that white Southerners expressed in their attitudes toward the region itself, the family, the relationship between the races and sexes, and between the elite and the masses." According to King, writers of the Southern Renaissance, including William Faulkner, struggled to come to terms with the implications of this shared cultural mythology for people living in the contemporary South.

Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, a novel centered on the decline and demise of a single early-twentieth-century Southern white family, is rich with elements that King defines as integral to the Southern family romance. I propose to investigate Faulkner’s uses and critiques of one of the major constituents of the romance: the myth of white womanhood. The role of the Southern white woman as scripted by the Southern family romance, according to King, was intensely self-contradictory. The white woman was expected to be "submissive, meek and gentle" toward men, but active and energetic, a "queen of the home," in her relations with children and African-Americans. At the same time, she was expected to be morally pure to the point of asexuality, a quality of character that sometimes extended to the loss of any emotional or nurturing capacities whatsoever. Faulkner’s portrait of three generations of Southern women—Caroline, Caddy, and Quentin Compson—may be read as a critique of the devastating effects of this cultural myth on the lives of Southern women as they struggle, respectively, to live up to, compromise with, or rebel against the feminine roles prescribed for them by the Southern family romance.
Example II.

Chinua Achebe's novel, *A Man of the People*, is primarily a novel about politics. It investigates the problems and causes of corruption in Nigerian politics by recounting the intricacies of the relationship between the narrator (Odili) and Chief M.A. Nanga. But even though the central political concerns of the novel are centered on male characters and their relationships, women, too, play an important role in the male characters' lives and interactions. For example, Nanga's first wife plays the important role of a village woman and "bush wife" (who insists on speaking her native tongue) while Elsie and Edna (more Westernized women who speak English or pidgin) are the main sources of tension between Odili and Nanga. Also, the two men spend a great deal of their time in the novel discussing women and their importance in the lives of men. The presence of women has important effects on the politics in the novel, culminating in Odili's challenge to Nanga's seat in the Nigerian Parliament. My paper will examine the roles of women in this male-centered novel, with a particular focus on how women and male-female relationships impact politics. What are the connections between gender relationships and Nigeria's political situation in this novel?

Example III.

*Hope Leslie*, by Catherine Maria Sedgwick, attempts to tell a historical romance of the American forest from a nontraditional point of view, emphasizing the positive roles of women and Native Americans in colonial American history. For example, Hope herself is a very nontraditional woman, following her own emotion-centered morality into adventures and troubles instead of staying within the bounds of standard, 17th-century Puritan definitions of womanhood. Even more radical, though, is the novel's reversal of traditional accounts of American Indians and their relationships with New England settlers. For instance, the novel includes an account of the Puritan "battle" with the Pequots that completely overturns the received version of the story and makes the Indians into innocent victims of brutal and unjust English aggression. Also, the book portrays not only Indian characters who are morally good and emotionally sympathetic, but ones whose anti-English viewpoints and actions are viewed with some understanding and sympathy. I will investigate just how deep Sedgwick's sympathetic portrayals of Native Americans go, in order to understand what the novel is saying about Native American / Anglo-American relationships in its contemporary context, the early 19th century.

Example IV.

W.D. Howells' novel, *An Imperative Duty*, seems very self-contradictory in its thinking about race. It seems to want to reject racism, but the narrator and the main anti-racist character (Dr. Olney) say almost as many things that seem racist as not. For instance, Olney says he can see no reason that African Americans and European Americans shouldn't live integrated social lives, but he also seems to think that whites would be doing African Americans a favor by admitting them to their social circles. He predicts "amalgamation" of whites and blacks into a single "mixed race" as the ultimate solution for the nation's racial problems, but he rejects marriage between whites and African Americans out of hand—before, of course, deciding to propose to Rhoda, who is one-sixteenth part African in ancestry. Instances of these kinds of self-contradictory thinking about race exist on almost every page of the novel. In my work toward the critical essay, I want to explore these contradictions, to see whether there is a way to interpret them that finds a resolution for them, or, if there isn't a single resolution, to try to explain what the pattern of contradictions is and why it might exist. At this point, I'm thinking it might have to do with Howells' incomplete success in trying to think himself to a place beyond the racist theories that his society offered him.