Through your dissertation or thesis proposal, you identify a key conversation among people working on your topic and you identify a gap that needs to be filled or a problem to be solved—an opening for you, through your thesis or dissertation, to join and advance the discussion. Consider how the below dissertation proposal abstracts answer both “What conversation does this study join?” and “What gap does it propose to fill?”

1. Despite the growing interest in nineteenth-century geographical representation, no geographer has yet seriously examined the remarkable discourses that emerged during the latter half of the century to represent the geographies of worlds beyond Earth. Popular histories of geography (e.g. Sheehan 1996; Morton 2002) indicate that astronomers collected extensive geographic data about the nearby planets, usually recording their findings in detailed maps that were strikingly similar in appearance to many of the well-studied imperial maps produced during the same time period. Although much of this astronomical-geographical knowledge compiled during the late nineteenth century has since been revised or discarded on the basis of twentieth-century remote sensing images, I contend that colonial era discourses had widespread scientific and cultural significance at the time they were created. (https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ic/samples/lane.pdf)

2. Reports on the state of freshwater reserves warn that severe local shortages are imminent, and predict that violent conflicts will emerge in water-scarce regions (Ohlson 1995, Elhance 1999). Water scarcity has been shown to cause civil conflict, particularly when accompanied by high population density, poverty, and income inequality (Homer-Dixon 1994, 1996; Hauge and Ellingsen, 1998). Urban migrant communities, where ethnic, religious, and class differences can exacerbate tensions, and community-wide patterns of adaptation to environmental scarcities are not well-formed, may be particularly vulnerable to water conflicts (Moench 2002). To better understand how conflicts develop in water-scarce regions, research is needed on the social and economic factors that mediate cooperation and conflict (Ronnfeldt 1997). I propose to do an in-depth study of Villa Israel, a barrio of Cochabamba, Brazil, where conflict over water is an established part of life. (http://lance.qualquant.net/ang5091/proposals/wutich_nsf.pdf)

3. Surface light fields and surface reflectance fields are image-based representations of lighting which are parameterized over geometry. Constructing these representations is a time-consuming and tedious process. The data sizes are quite large, often requiring multiple gigabytes to represent complex reflectance qualities. The result can only be viewed after a length post-process is complete, so it can be difficult to determine when the light field is sufficiently sampled. Often, uncertainty about the sampling density leads users to capture many more images than necessary in order to guarantee adequate coverage. . . . The goal of this work is a “casual capture” system which allows the user to interactively capture and view surface light fields and surface reflectance fields. (http://www.cs.unc.edu/~cssa/guides/proposals/coombe.pdf)

4. Historians searching for the causes of the Reformation have long assigned central importance to the role of the printing press. . . . Recent scholarship has produced a number of important studies examining the role of printed media in the spread of the Reformation message. Much of this work tends to focus on the production and reception of Reformation texts and images, with little attention paid to the means by which such texts were distributed and circulated. Such studies are often premised on the assumption that texts and ideas enjoyed a relatively free circulation and that patterns of book production and distribution therefore serve as essentially transparent measures of interest and demand. . . . However, virtually nowhere in sixteenth-century Europe were ideas likely to flow unregulated through some critical discursive field. . . . I propose to examine the censorship of religious texts and images within the imperial city of Nuremberg, from [1513 until 1555]. (http://www.virginia.edu/history/graduate/papers/dispro_example.html)
To create a space and define a precise contribution to a disciplinary conversation, you might think of yourself as making through your proposal’s introduction **three signal moves**:

**Move 1: Establish the Research Territory** by showing how the general research area is important or problematic and/or by introducing and summarizing the research so far in your particular line of inquiry. Think of this as **telling the story** of scholarship that leads to the opening you’ve identified. Consider these skeletal examples of opening statements that help a writer assert the centrality of work on this topic for a field and to begin to tell the story of the scholarly discussion on this topic so far:

- Recently, there has been growing interest in .
- The possibility of . . . has generated wide interest in .
- The development of . . . is a classic problem in .
- The development of . . . has led to the hope that .
- The . . . has become a favorite topic for analysis .
- Knowledge of . . . has a great importance for .
- The study of . . . has become an important aspect of .
- A central issue in . . . is .
- (The) . . . has been extensively studied in recent years.
- Many investigators have recently turned to .
- The relationship between . . . and . . . has been investigated by many researchers.
- Many recent studies have focused on .

**Move 2: Create a Niche** by identifying the gap in the previous research, the problem that this field confronts, or a new direction that previous work makes possible. Most often writers use a “quasi-negative subject” or “contrastive statement” to indicate a gap in the current research and to indicate, too, that Move #1 has come to an end as the writer pivots toward the contribution she will make. Note, however, how the skeletal sentences that end the below list offer a “quasi-positive subject” or building-on approach to creating a niche:

- However, little information . . . [or little attention, little data, little research, few studies etc.]
- No studies/data/calculations . . . [or None of these studies/findings/calculations . . .]
- The research has tended to focus on . . ., rather than on .
- These studies have emphasized . . ., as opposed to .
- Although considerable research has been devoted to . . ., less attention has been paid to .
- However, it remains unclear whether .
- It would thus be of interest to learn how .
- If these results could be confirmed, they would provide strong evidence for .
- The findings suggest that this approach might be less [or more] effective when .
- It would seem, therefore, that further investigations are needed in order to .

**Move 3: Occupy the Niche** by stating the purpose or goal of your research. Depending on your field, you might anticipate and state a hypothesis or line of argument, your guiding questions, and/or the value of this research. Depending on the field, a writer might move here from the impersonal to personal:

- I contend .
- I propose .

Or the writer might highlight not what the researcher (“I”) will do but what the study will undertake:

- The goal of this study .
- This study seeks .