



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center An Introduction's Three Signal Moves

Adapted from Carnegie Mellon University Global Communication Center and Swales and Feak, *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*

When readers sit down with your proposal, grant application, or opening paragraphs to an article or chapter, they seek first to answer two key questions: “What conversation does this study join?” *and* “What gap does it propose to fill?” Use these three signal moves to craft proposals, pitch pages, and introductions that answer these key reader questions *and* spotlight what in your contribution is relevant, needed, and new.

Move 1: Establish the Research Territory

Think of this as **telling the story** of scholarship **that leads to the opening or gap** you’ve identified. You can also think of this as presenting the **status quo** or **current state of affairs** in your field regarding your topic and also the **significance** of this topic.

Consider these skeletal examples of statements that help a writer tell the story of a topic so far while also preparing to pivot toward an opening or gap for the writer’s project:

- 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 . . .
- Knowledge of . . . has a great importance for . . .
- 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: Identify a Gap.

You create space for your own project by identifying the **gap** in the previous research, the **problem** that this field confronts, or a **new direction** that previous work makes possible. Here you want to show that the current state of research on your topic is incomplete, insufficient, inconclusive, under-developed, or suggestive, demonstrating the need for your project.

While most often writers use a “quasi-negative subject” or “contrastive statement” to indicate a gap and to pivot toward their contribution, the examples below also end with three “quasi-positive subject” or building-on approach:

- However, little information ... [or little attention, little data, few studies etc.]
- No studies/data/calculations ... [or None of these studies/findings/calculations ...]

- These studies have emphasized ..., as opposed to ...
- While 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 ...
- It would seem, therefore, that further investigations are needed in order to ...

Move 3: Occupy the Gap.

You occupy the niche you've created by stating the **purpose** or **goal** of your research. Depending on your field, you might state a **hypothesis** or line of **argument**, your **guiding questions**, **thesis**, and/or the **value** of this research.

Your goal is to show that your research offers a timely, needed, or innovative approach to or solution for the existing gap. Ways of occupying a niche and underscoring relevance, importance, and novelty include

- A **new theory or hypothesis**. Here you craft the preceding discussion (the gap) to set up and indicate the promise and efficacy of a new theory or hypothesis.
- A **new solution** to a problem or controversy. Here you will want to make sure your discussion of other proposed or attempted solutions (the gap) sets you up to signal why your solution is better or may be more responsive or successful.
- A **new methodology**. Here you craft the preceding discussion to show shortcomings of previous studies' methodologies that showcase what is improved in the methodology you propose.
- A **new domain**. If you are proposing to investigate a new population, site, material, text, or other phenomenon, it may be that your preceding paragraphs won't highlight shortcoming and critique but the promise or importance of work in a field—and its potential application to or complication through the new domain you propose.

Depending on the field, a writer might move here from the impersonal to personal:

- I contend ...
- I propose ...

Or you might highlight not what you ("I") will do but what the study does:

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

In occupying a gap, **avoid** wherever possible words like "neglected," "failed," or "ignored" to critique other researchers in your field. (Those researchers may well be among your readers and, in the case of proposals, your referees!) Try framing your contribution in positive terms: "While X pioneered research in ..., my work contributes to/supplements/responds/resolves ..."