Most body paragraphs in a history essay are built around a core set of moves:

**Assertion**: An arguable claim about the past.

**Citation**: Quoted text supporting the assertion.

**Explanation**: An interpretation of the quotation that explains how the words prove the assertion.

The relationship between the first two of these elements is clear enough: debatable assertions demand evidence if they are to be believed. The sticking point in some historical writing is the third step—explanation. Writers often assume it is clear HOW the quotation proves the assertion, when in fact their reader needs them to connect the dots. Quotations do not speak for themselves; so always explain after you quote.

- Your explanation should spell out how the quote proves the assertion, specifically. Don’t just repeat the assertion.
- To do this, point back to the words in the citation, re-quoting them if need be.

**Example**:

*W.E.B. Du Bois was surely correct when he wrote that Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise “practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races.” Speaking before a mostly white audience, Washington said:*

> As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by with a devotion that no foreigner can approach….*

*This allusion to the humility of southern blacks “in the past” seems to promise a work force as servile as the old slave population.*
Debating the Evidence: You’ll discover that spelling out your assumptions creates as many questions as it answers, so that “explaining” your quote will often lead to debate, to new ideas, and to more substantial paragraphs. Consider inserting an imaginary skeptic’s question or objection after an ACE move once or twice in your essay.

Here’s an example of how considering an objection to this interpretation of the Booker T. Washington quote could lead the writer to add their own spin to Dubois’ assertion.

W.E.B. Dubois was surely correct when he wrote that Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise “practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races.” Addressing a mostly white audience, Washington claimed that blacks had “proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves.” This allusion to the humility of southern blacks “in the past” seems to promise a work force as servile as the old slave population. But did this promise to continue “our loyalty to you in the past” necessarily allude to the slave system? It did. Washington’s examples of past loyalty emphasized forms of personal service—for example, “nursing your children” and other domestic occupations—that recalled the paternalism of the plantation system. Washington’s effort to mollify southern whites skirted dangerously close to nostalgia for the slave past.