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 it proves 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. Historians are so fond of “unearth[ing]” new documents that we sometimes forget that evidence does not speak for itself—that its meaning may not be obvious to the reader. For that reason, I urge you to err on the side of explicit explanation:

- Your explanation should make explicit your assumptions about why the quote proves the assertion.
- In doing so, your explanation should point back to the actual words in the citation, re-quoting them if need be.

I think you’ll find that spelling out your assumptions often creates as many questions as it answers, so that “explaining” your quote will often lead to debate, to new ideas, and to more sophisticated paragraphs.
Examples of Poor Explanations

Example One

If we look at the story of Cain and Abel, it is hard to overlook the resemblance of a father-son relationship between God and Cain. When Cain’s sacrifice was not accepted by God, he “was very angry and his face fell” (Genesis 4:6). In addition, there is a strong connection between the earth and death.

Notice that this writer moves on to a new idea before explaining how the quote suggests a “father-son” relationship. What is the author assuming about how the evidence proves the assertion? Write a sentence that makes that assumption explicit.

Example Two

This person has done a better job of explaining how the quote supports their claim. How might they more fully take advantage of the words in the quote, though?

Right from the start we can see a contrast between Cain and Abel. Cain is the one born with the help of God, and Abel’s birth is mentioned as “Afterward she had another child, his brother Abel” (The New English Bible, Genesis 4:2). This sets the importance of the first born having all the blessings and already setting them up for who is to be the better of the two.

Better Explanation: This reference to Abel as “another child,” as opposed to a “man,” makes Abel less important than Cain. He only matters in relation to Cain, as “his brother,” not as an independent man.