



“Assert-Cite-Explain” Paragraphs

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: Analysis of *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 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* or *why* 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:

Assertion: *The owners believed their treatment of slaves was completely justified.*

Citation: “[T]hey [the slaves] had forfeited their Freedom before I bought them, either by Crimes or by being taken in War, according to the Custom of their Country; and they being now my Property, I was resolved to let them feel my Resentment, if they abused my kindness.”

Explanation: *By saying they were rightfully slaves because of their “Crimes” in Africa, Captain Snelgrave blamed the slaves rather than himself for the loss of their freedom. His promise that disobedient slaves would “feel” his anger shows that physical punishment would result from this supposed legality of slavery.*

Notice how the writer points back to key words like “Crimes” and “feel.” “Feel” is particularly important, because it supports the idea of physical cruelty the reader might otherwise miss.

From ACE to Paragraphs

By explaining your quotations, you draw out further implications of the evidence and open the door to debate. Here is an example of you might produce a longer paragraph out of the core “ACE” sequence.

Note: when changing an ACE card into a paragraph, make sure the topic sentence indicates both your assertion and the specific topic of this paragraph. In this example, the original **assertion** is in bold, and the paragraph topic is underlined.

The slave owners justified their inhuman cruelty by blaming the Africans themselves for their enslavement. For example, Captain Snelgrave argued that slaves “had forfeited their Freedom before I bought them, either by Crimes or by being taken in War, according to the Custom of their Country; and they being now my Property, I was resolved to let them feel my Resentment, if they abused my kindness.” By saying they were rightfully slaves because of their “Crimes” in Africa, Snelgrave blamed the slaves rather than himself for the loss of their freedom. His promise that disobedient slaves would “feel” his anger shows that physical punishment would result from this supposed legality of slavery. It’s true that the Captain emphasizes his acts of “kindness” in comparison with other slavers. But Snelgrave’s professions of humanity should be taken with a grain of salt. For example, when says the mutineer slaves begged him to “forgive them, and promising for the future to be obedient . . . if I would not punish them this time,” it’s clear that he has punished them before. Their child-like request for “forgiveness” comes from their complete and violent deprivation of liberty—not from the slave captain’s humane treatment.

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