

Toulmin Argument

(Note: Different instructors may have variations of this model. Please refer to your instructor’s notes.)

Stephen Toulmin, a modern rhetorician, developed a model for analyzing the kind of argument you read and hear every day, in newspapers and on television, at work, in classrooms, and in conversation. Toulmin’s model focuses on identifying the basic parts of an argument. You can use Toulmin’s model in two ways. First, analyze your sources by identifying the basic elements of the arguments being made. Second, test and critique your own argument.

Toulmin identifies the three essential parts of any argument as the **claim**; the **data** (also called **grounds** or **evidence**), which support the claim; and the **warrant**.

The **warrant** is the assumption on which the claim and the evidence depend. Another way of saying this would be that the warrant explains why the data support the claim. For example, suppose you see one of those commercials for a product that promises to give you whiter teeth. Here are the basic parts of the argument behind the commercial:

- Claim:** You should buy our tooth-whitening product.
- Data or Grounds:** Studies show that teeth are 50% whiter after using the product for a specified time.
- Warrant:** People want whiter teeth.

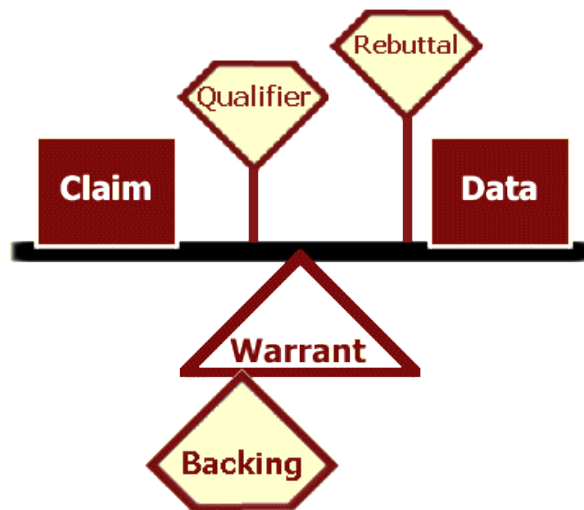


Notice that those commercials do not usually bother trying to convince you that you want whiter teeth; instead, they *assume* that you have accepted the value our culture places on whiter teeth.

When an assumption (a **warrant**) is unstated, it is called an **implicit warrant**. Sometimes; however, the warrant may need to be stated because it is a powerful part of the argument. When the warrant is stated, it is called an **explicit warrant**.

Toulmin says that the weakest part of any argument is its weakest warrant. Remember that the warrant is the link between the data and the claim. If the warrant is not valid, the argument collapses.

Now that you are familiar with the three main parts of an argument, let us look at three other elements Toulmin identified.



Qualifier: A **qualifier** is a statement about how strong the claim is. For example, if you are claiming that stains on teeth are caused by drinking coffee, you might need to acknowledge that there may be other causes as well. Your qualified claim would be that drinking coffee is the **most significant cause** (although perhaps not the only cause) of stained teeth.

Rebuttal: A **rebuttal** is an exception to your claim. For example, you might have to acknowledge that a certain kind of coffee does not stain teeth. Your claim, however, would be that coffee is the major cause of stained teeth **except for those coffee drinkers who drink the special non-teeth staining coffee**.

Backing: Sometimes the warrant is an important part of the argument. Additionally, sometimes the warrant is not broadly understood or broadly accepted. In this case, a speaker or writer may have to defend the warrant. In our example, the warrant would need to be backed by reasons such as the argument that whiter teeth will help you get more dates or that whiter teeth will make you look better in yearbook photos. Reasons that support the warrant are called **backing**.

By identifying the parts of an argument so each can be evaluated separately, Toulmin created a useful model for analyzing the validity of an argument. Submit each source you study to rigorous Toulmin analysis. Identify each argument's **claims**, **data**, and **warrants**. Look for **qualifiers**, **rebuttals**, and **backing** for the warrants. Compare one claim with another. Compare data between the two arguments. Compare warrants and their backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals. By analyzing the separate parts of an argument, you will be much better equipped to evaluate each argument's validity.

"Toulmin Argument Structure." School of Professional Studies, Trinity Washington University, www.trinitydc.edu/sps/files/2012/01/Toulmin-Argument-Structure1.doc.