
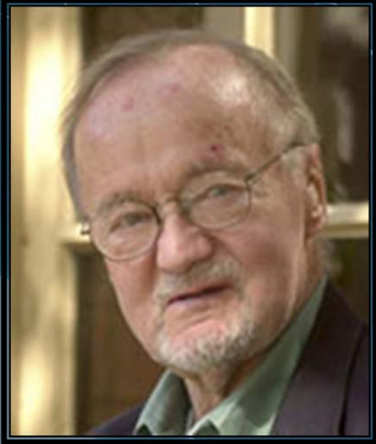


*The Toulmin Model*



## In this lecture...

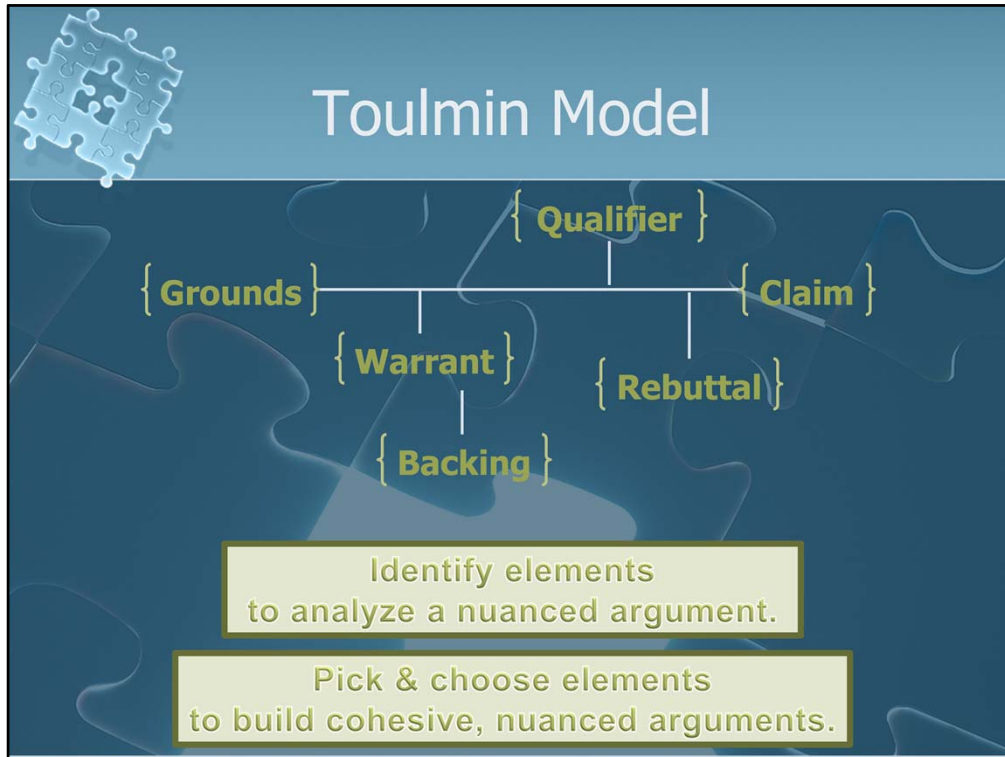
- Stephen Toulmin
- Model Elements
  - Basic
    - Conclusion
    - Warrant
    - Data
  - Expanded
    - Backing
    - Qualifier
    - Rebuttal
- Resources



Stephen Toulmin

Stephen Toulmin's model of argument analysis has become the standard in the years since its publication, and many speech, critical thinking, and philosophy classes use it in the study of argumentation. It's the model we will use in this class, too.

While some explore outer space or the depths of the ocean, Toulmin (b. 1922) spent his career thinking about **thinking** and the ways we construct the world through *our patterned use of language*. One of his ongoing efforts was to "develop practical arguments which can be used effectively in evaluating the ethics behind moral issues" (Wikipedia). It was Toulmin's recognition of the limitations of formal argumentation to describe and evaluate complex arguments of every day life that led him to focus on developing a more flexible model that included more elements we commonly use to shade meaning. Toulmin has written prolifically, and his works are easily available for further study.



Toulmin's Model for Argument Analysis includes six major elements. The first three are most basic: the **claim**, the **warrant**, and the **grounds**. These take care of most fairly simple arguments. The addition of **backing**, **qualifiers** and **rebuttal** help to cover more complex arguments.

As we go through the explanation of Toulmin's model, try to clarify in your own mind how the terms function within the whole picture of an argument.

**The Claim**

{ Claim }



**THIS IS A DOG.**



**THIS IS A CAT.**

The claim can also be called the conclusion, hypothesis, proposition, thesis, or even the premise, plea, or position. That can get a bit confusing so you need to keep in mind what it is the claim ... by any name ... tries to accomplish. The **claim** of an argument is what the arguer wants the audience to **accept, believe, or do**. It is a statement that asserts something is valid, true, real, factual, or believable. Questions cannot be claims.

There is **no argument unless there is a claim** and there is some dispute that the claim is accurate. For example, if I say “This is a dog,” everyone would say, “Yes, it’s a dog,” and that would be the end of it. However, what if I say, “This is a cat”? Then there is going to be a debate.

Two of the first three key elements in Toulmin’s Model can be referred to by different names. For instance, the claim could also be called the conclusion, proposition, hypothesis or thesis. And the grounds could also be called the data, reasons, and evidence. It’s important to know that these terms are sometimes used to refer to slightly different and distinct elements in other theories, but they are also used to describe the very same thing in other instances. Even in this class I will use the terms somewhat interchangeably. I know... it’s not fair, but that’s just the way it is. That’s why we’ll take a bit deeper look at each element.


The Claims lecture will help you to better understand the differences among different types

of assertions.

“Citizen Kane is one of the best movies of all time” is a claim. It makes a **statement** the arguer wants the audience to accept. “Honeybees are disappearing” is also a claim. So is “Hagen Daz Strawberry ice cream is the best!” The difference between the first two claims and the final one is how much support is needed to convince the audience.


The strawberry ice cream claim is one of taste, and taste is highly subjective, so it’s probably not worth the effort to argue this – especially with my chocoholic husband! The Citizen Kane assertion can be argued on the basis of innovation and other more defensible types of evidence, but again, this claim is also somewhat subjective. The honeybee claim, though, is one that asserts a fact, and facts can be checked. The one making this claim can and should provide sufficient factual evidence to support the conclusion.

Most arguments require more than simply making a claim in order to have them accepted, and this is especially true when making an academic argument.



# The Grounds

{ Grounds } ————— { Claim }



**THIS IS A DOG.**

- **A dog...**
  - is a group/pack animal
  - needs social hierarchy
  - is omnivorous (though classed carnivore)
  - is domesticated
  - has fixed, not retractable, claws
  - wags its tail
  - is anxious to please
  - has reflexes slower than a cat's
  - is trainable to support human needs
  - has a more stable, less sinuous body
  - has balance less well developed than cat's

In Toulmin's model, the **support** for an argument is called the **grounds**. It can also be called data, reasons, evidence, and even proof. Again, I will be using these terms almost interchangeably even though in some circumstances they have unique definitions. For instance, in law, **evidence** has a much different definition and expectation than **reasons**, even though they both function as **grounds** for an argument being made.

The grounds that support a claim can range from very subjective assertions (weak reasoning) to concrete, tangible proof. What works as evidence in one situation may not work as evidence in all situations, though.

Evidence can be categorized in a number of ways. It can be direct or secondary. It can be physical or circumstantial. It can be anecdotal, testimonial, statistical, or analogical. We will explore the various types of evidence later in the class. For our current purpose it's important to realize that **if one makes a claim, one must support that claim with evidence sufficient to make the case.**



The **warrant** is a unique aspect of practical argumentation that Toulmin introduced to help reveal the values and beliefs of the arguer because they have such a strong impact on the argument being made.

The warrant is what causes an arguer to think it is appropriate to make the particular claim that's being made. It's the answer to the question: "Why do I believe this?" ... the "What is behind the face I show to the world?"

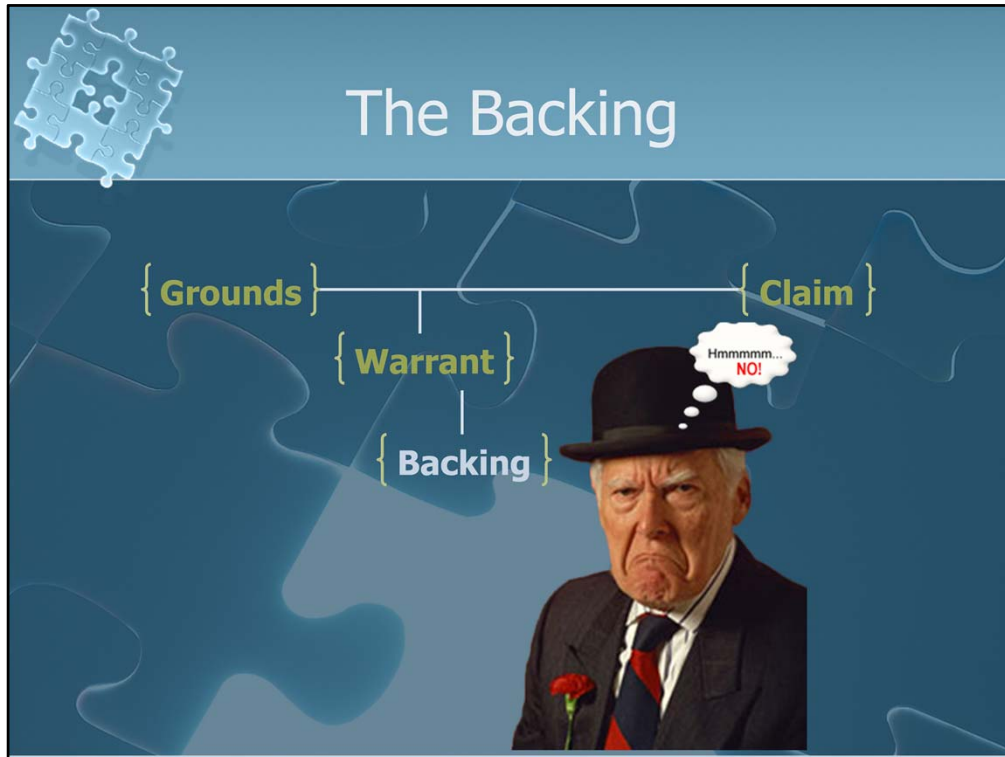
For instance, the person who argues abortion should not be allowed is usually functioning on a warrant that a fertilized egg constitutes a human. Further, that person may believe there is a moral obligation to avoid ending a human life. We can write a syllogism to show that warrant:

- All human life is sacred and should be protected.
- A fertilized human egg is a human life.
- Therefore, no fertilized human egg should be destroyed.

On the other side, the warrant may be that actualized personhood takes precedence over potential personhood. We can write a syllogism to show that warrant, too:

- Actual persons have rights not given to potential persons.
- A fertilized egg is a potential but not actual individual.
- Therefore, a woman (an actual person) has a right to decide the fate of the potential individual her body is nurturing.

Warrants are rarely explicitly stated. There are a good many times when they are not even recognized by those making the argument. However, they are the fundamental values and assumptions each of us holds (our individual personal world view) that often cause us to **not** think rationally about an argument.



The backing is the **evidence** (the grounds) one uses to support the **warrant**. All the same types of evidence might come into play, and the addition of beliefs – such as religious beliefs – can also be backing that is supporting a warrant. The thing about backing that supports warrants is that it **need not be rational or factual or even accurate**. It is simply the evidence the arguer is using to support a belief or assumption.

For example, Bill Clinton’s explanation for why he was sexually involved with other women when he was president was, “Because I could do it.” Reduced to a syllogism, this would look something like ...

Presidents can do what they want to do.  
 I was president.  
 Therefore, I could do what I wanted to do.

Backing can be profoundly important ... and misguided. Let’s look at an example:

Claim: Group X should not be taught to read and write.  
 Grounds: Reading and writing would lead Group X to be dissatisfied.  
 Grounds: Dissatisfaction could lead to unrest, even violence.  
 Warrant: Group X must be prevented from becoming violent.

Backing: Violence could be harmful to me or my way of life.

The arguer certainly isn't going to explain the claim as being born of fear and may not even recognize it as such. To be a strong arguer, you should ask yourself WHY you think what you do. Is your claim based on strong factual evidence, or is based on something weaker such as a desire to maintain the status quo? When examining the arguments of others, try to figure out what it is that is causing the person to take a particular position. In the example above, the claim and grounds were made by slave owners who may not have realized the flaws in their warrants and backing that lead to flawed arguments.



Qualifiers are limitations placed on an argument. They are very useful because they indicate how strongly or forcefully the arguer intends to defend the claim. As with other parts of arguments, there are different types of qualifiers, but you can frequently identify them because of keywords that indicate **limitation** or **strength**.

“Frequently” in the previous sentence is a qualifier. It indicates the claim being made is fairly strong but still has room for situations in which one cannot identify a qualifier because of a particular word. A few of the many other words that indicate qualification include all, some, none, occasionally, usually, probably, possibly, and statistics.

Hmmm... How can a statistic be considered a qualifier? Well, what if someone says, “Smoking is directly responsible for 90% of lung cancer deaths... (Smoking Fact Sheet)? Doesn’t that seem like a stronger argument than saying “most lung cancer deaths are due to smoking”?

Thoughts on overused qualifiers:

**Basically** is “the written equivalent of ‘Um.’” – Jack Lynch, *The English Language*

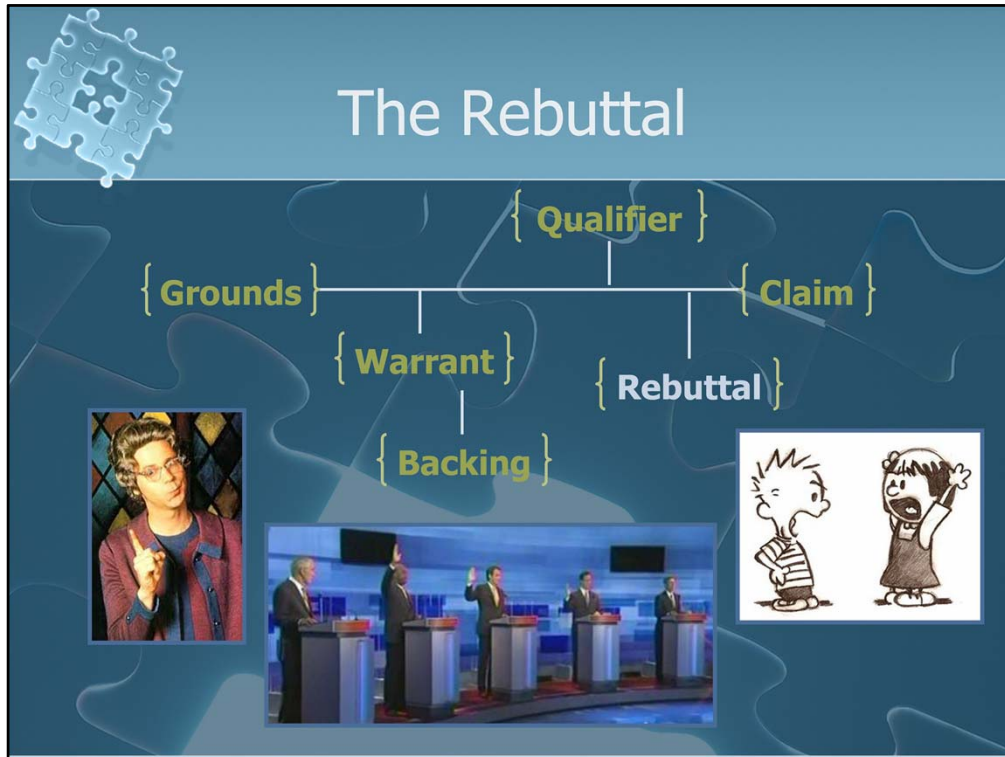
**Very** “surfaces repeatedly in flabby writing. In almost every context in which it appears, its omission would result in at most a negligible loss. And in many contexts the idea would be

more powerfully expressed without it.” – Bryan Garner, Garner’s Modern American Usage

**Actually** is “meaningless word.” – Ernest Gowers, A Dictionary of Modern English Usage

**“Rather, very, little, pretty** – these are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words.” William Strunk, Jr & E.B. White, The Elements of Style

The most important thing to remember about qualifiers is that they alter the scope of the argument being made. They either make the claim more forceful and strong, or they make it weaker. Examine your own writing for an overabundance of qualifiers. Too many of them severely weaken an argument.



Rebuttal is the part of an argument many arguers ignore. Rebuttal is the opposition's point of view. If an arguer forgets there are multiple perspectives to be considered and multiple interpretations of most types of evidence, then the arguer can get caught short if someone makes an objection which has not been considered.

When you're making an argument you should always take the time to find out what the opposition **REALLY** thinks, what evidence it uses to make its case, not just going by what you think is the opposing position. Doing that can help you to make a stronger case for your own position by showing how the opposition's position is weaker. Or, it may cause you to rethink your own position because the opposition is using better factual evidence than you are.

For instance, in the recent healthcare debate there are those who support the administration's plan and there are those who oppose it. Some of those who oppose the plan argue it contains passages that establish "death panels" that will pick and choose who gets to live. Because the proponents of the plan can point to the exact passages that show this is not the case, the arguments of those who claim there will be death panels is weaker than those who claim there won't be any such thing. But if the proponents did not take the time to look up the passages being referenced, they would have had no way to refute the claims being made. And, if we accept without question the claims of the opponents, we would be acting on erroneous information.



# Resources

Stephen Toulmin – Wikipedia - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen\\_Toulmin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Toulmin)

Toulmin's Argument Model - [http://changingminds.org/disciplines/argument/making\\_argument/toulmin.htm](http://changingminds.org/disciplines/argument/making_argument/toulmin.htm)

A Conversation with Stephen Toulmin - <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/1997-03/toulmin.html>

Stephen Toulmin – *Return to Reason* - [http://books.google.com/books?id=4dF164TdmOkC&dq=stephen+toulmin&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=k7gF3h9Lpn&sig=HFItx9FF\\_EdyIuIN5qO66tPXZdo&hl=en&ei=M0IzSvLbNY6EmQfUJ3aCg&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=3#v=onepage&q=&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=4dF164TdmOkC&dq=stephen+toulmin&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=k7gF3h9Lpn&sig=HFItx9FF_EdyIuIN5qO66tPXZdo&hl=en&ei=M0IzSvLbNY6EmQfUJ3aCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3#v=onepage&q=&f=false)

Works by Stephen Toulmin - <http://philpapers.org/autosense.pl?searchStr=Stephen%20Toulmin>

Smoking 101 Fact Sheet - <http://www.lungusa.org/site/c.dvLUK9O0E/b.39853/>