

Understanding Arguments

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What is Argument?

Much of the writing we do at the college level is **argument**. An academic argument can be defined, simply, as a *claim* (opinion), supported by *reasons* and *evidence*, written in order to *persuade* someone. You write an argument in the form of a cover letter to persuade your potential employer to hire you. You make an argument in the form of a speech to your parents to persuade them to let you borrow their car. You write an argument in the form of an e-mail to your professor to persuade her to accept your late homework (good luck!).

A successful argument, then, will generally do the following things:

- Offer a clear claim (opinion) about a topic
- Support that claim with reasons and evidence, and be logically sound
- Attempt to persuade a specific audience
- Portray the author as knowledgeable, credible, and trustworthy

As we discuss what argument *is*, it might also be helpful here to point out what argument is *not*.

1. Argument is not contradiction or conflict.

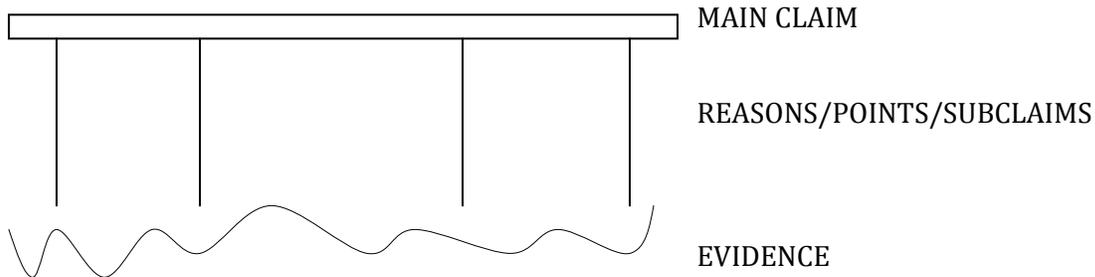
While this may be the sense of the word argument that you're most familiar with, in this course we do not think of arguments as shouting matches. In these sorts of fights, the goal is to win. The "loser" of the argument leaves angry, and both parties end up more or less where they started. Nothing much is accomplished. In an *academic* argument, however, the purpose is to persuade (to convince an audience to agree with or understand you). From this perspective, an academic argument is almost exactly the opposite of the types of hostile contradictions we often term "arguments."

2. Argument is not explanation.

Many students have only been asked to explain something they have studied back to the teacher. This is not the same as arguing for a position or an interpretation, which you'll need to do in this course. See this explanation at the *Purdue OWL*: "An argumentative paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The claim could be... a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. The goal of the argumentative paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on the evidence provided." An *explanatory* paper would describe how students abuse ADD medication to stay up all night and study, and a little bit about how those drugs work. An *argument* paper could claim that fears about abuse are exaggerated, or could claim that students' grades actually suffer when they abuse ADD medication, or could advocate that the student government host a public forum to discuss the abuse of ADD medication by students.

The Parts of an Argument

At its most basic, an argument needs to have three components: a main **claim** (thesis), **reasons** (or points or sub-claims) which support the main claim, and **evidence** to support the reasons. We can think of how these parts are arranged as a table, where the tabletop is the main claim, supported by the legs (reasons), which are supported by the ground (evidence):



A good argument needs to have a claim, reasons, and evidence, but those pieces also have to make sense logically. They have to be used well.

Here's an example.

A claim needs to be supported by a **reason**:

Claim: I think it will rain tomorrow

Reason: because that's what the weather forecast said.

Reasons must, in turn, be supported by **evidence**:

Evidence: The meteorologist on Channel 5 said there is 85% chance of showers in the afternoon tomorrow.

If the reason is *relevant* to the claim, then the claim is **warranted**:

I think it will rain tomorrow *because that's what the weather forecast said*.

Here the assumption is that the weather forecast is a good place to learn about whether or not it will rain. But if the reason is *not relevant* to the claim, then the claim is **unwarranted**:

I think it will rain tomorrow *because I burned my toast*.

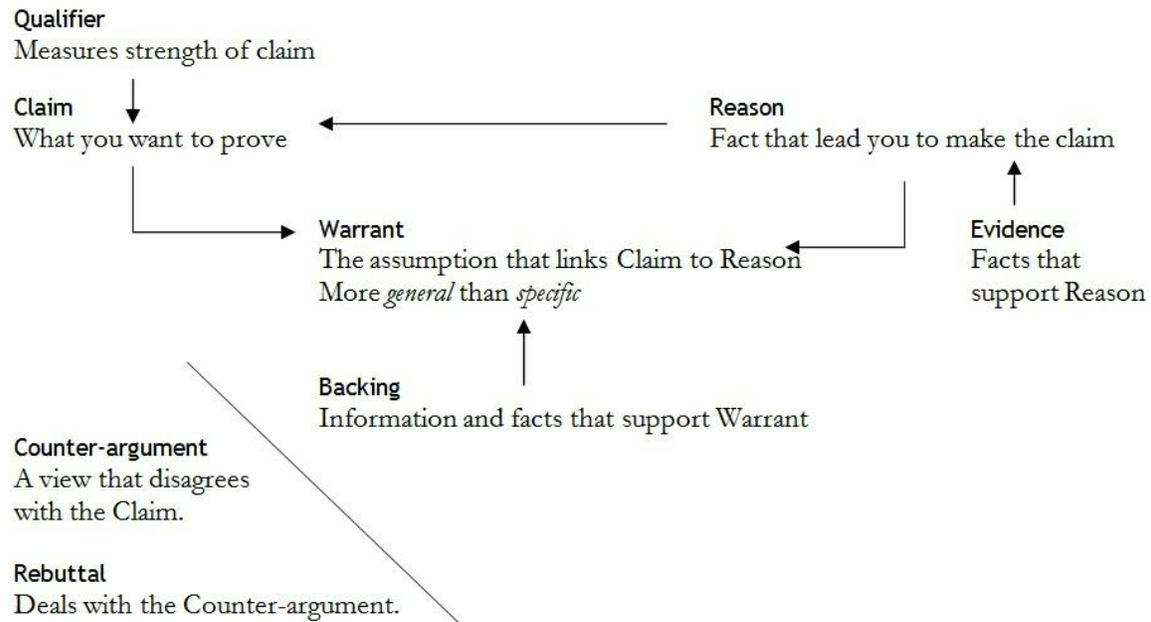
We don't agree with the assumption that burning toast has anything to do with whether or not it will rain. So we don't think this argument is a good one.

Evaluating Arguments: The Toulmin Model

If part of a table is broken or weak, or the ground underneath the table is wobbly, the table isn't functional (even though it's a table). Just because an argument has a claim, reasons, and evidence doesn't mean that the argument is good or logically sound. We only need to look on the Internet to find examples of poor or unconvincing arguments. One website actually makes the claim that we all should wear tin-foil helmets because we need to protect ourselves from aliens who read minds, as evidenced by fuzzy videos of UFO's posted on YouTube. It's an argument, but it's not a good one. There are many problems here, ranging from the credibility of the evidence to the idea that these videos mean that aliens are coming to read our minds to the idea that tin-foil helmets would protect us all from alien attacks.

It's important to be able to evaluate whether or not an argument is good before you accept its claim. One way to evaluate an argument is called the Toulmin model (a system of

practical logic developed in the early 1960s by the philosopher Stephen Toulmin). We can think of the parts of the model as follows:



Let's take the following **claim**:

The USC football coach Steve Spurrier should be governor of South Carolina.

This sounds a little ridiculous, so let's give a **reason**:

Because he is a great football coach.

Perhaps we can argue with whether or not he is a good football coach, but we can cite some **evidence**: his win-loss record, his graduation rate for players, his awards, etc.

The insight of the Toulmin Model is that the argument succeeds or fails based on how relevant we think the reason is to the claim. The assumption that it is relevant is the **warrant**. In this case, the warrant is

Good coaches have qualities that make them good governors.

And we certainly can find ideas that support this warrant, which Toulmin calls **backing**:

Good coaches are good leaders, they have people skills, they deal with the media, they can perform well under pressure.

So all together the argument would go something like this:

A good football coach has certain qualities that would make him a good state governor (*warrant*): leadership, people skills, and the ability to perform well under pressure (*backing*). Steve Spurrier should be governor for South Carolina (*claim*) because he is a great football coach (*reason*). Not only is win-loss record XX-XX, but he also has been recognized... (*evidence*).

And we'd also want to acknowledge the arguments of those opposed to our position, and deal with them in some way:

Of course, some may say that the political challenges of being a governor has nothing to do with coaching. But they do: coaching is very political. He has to build consensus with and lead competitive people...