The Toulmin Argument

Many writers of arguments look to terminology developed by philosopher Stephen Toulmin to describe the elements of an argumentative essay. To use this method to construct your argument, you must use logical structure, not in an attempt to prove any point, but in the hopes of convincing your readers of the validity of the points used in the argument. Using claim, because clause, grounds, warrant, backing, rebuttal, and qualifiers, you attempt to convince the reader to accept the claim of the argument. (You can also use Toulmin criteria to check that your argument has all the key ingredients it needs to be successful.) Here are the main components of a Toulmin argument:

Writing Format

· Make a claim. (Many papers will include more than one.) Within Toulmin’s schema, the writer must first choose a topic and then form an opinion about the topic. This information is written in one sentence, which is called the claim. (Ex: Standardized tests are biased against female and minority students.) A because clause is added to a claim as a reason that supports the claim. A claim (proposition, thesis) answers the question "What point will your paper will try to make?" or "What belief or opinion is are you defending?"

· Provide grounds for your claim: Grounds are evidence in the form of facts, data, or any information that supports the claim. To be credible to an audience, claims must usually be supported with specific evidence. In a Toulmin argument, readers ask, "How do you know that is true?" or "What is that based on?" Such questions are challenging the writer to prove the claim with support. Thus, grounds (or support) answer the question, “How do you know?”

· Explore the warrant for the claim. A warrant is the unstated assumption underlying a claim--a value, belief, principle, or perhaps the inferences or assumptions that are taken for granted by the writer (and sometimes by the argument). Warrants connect (conspicuously or inconspicuously) the claim and the support; they derive from our cultural experiences and personal observations. [For instance, if over the last five years, girls at Madison High have received higher grades than boys in every subject and yet the Madison boys consistently score higher on the SAT than the girls do, someone might claim that the SAT was biased against girls. The warrant for this claim is the belief that something must be preventing the girls from showing their academic excellence on the SAT.]

· Provide backing for the warrant. Backing is support for the warrant and answers the question, “Why do you believe that?” Thus, you must provide additional evidence (in the form of examples, facts and data) that helps to support the warrant and further strengthen the claim. Depending upon your audience, this backing could also include emotional appeals, quotations from famous people or recognized experts, or statements based on the writer’s personal credibility. [For example, in the argument on test bias, readers might expect to see statistics that prove the test questions are biased, samples of misleading questions, quotations from educators and testing experts, and testimony from students who have taken such tests. All of these might be good kinds of backing, depending on the identity of the audience.]
· **Explore the rebuttal to the claim.** A rebuttal acknowledges the limitations of the claim. That is, you might acknowledge that under some circumstances, the claim may not be true. Also, you should consider the ways in which an opponent might dispute the reasons, grounds, warrant, or the backing. [In order to defuse an audience’s potential challenges, some writers use qualifiers to clarify their claims and protect their credibility. Qualifiers are usually adverbs that modify the verb in the claim or adjectives that modify a key noun; some common ones are typically, usually, for the most part, some, several, few, and sometimes. Use these qualifiers sparingly but appropriately. Acknowledging that the claim may not be absolute protects you from having to prove that your claim is true in every case. However, when you qualify your claim, you make it easier to prove, but you also weaken it.]

Note: You cannot simply state the rebuttal. You must rebut the rebuttal! If you can discredit the opposition’s counter-arguments by proving that their logic is faulty, their support is weak or their warrants are invalid, you have created a rebuttal that supports your own original position and furthers your claim.

· **End with a concession.** Finally, a key point in Toulmin arguments is the concession, which brings differing opinions together by acknowledging a part of the opposing argument that cannot be refuted. Conceding that an opposing point is valid and then building upon it to further one's own claim allows a writer to make the audience feel appreciated without giving up her or his own position.