



Analyzing Arguments using Stephen Toulmin's Scheme

In this context the term *argument* includes the entire complex of statements used to make and back up a claim. For example, we might overhear on the street the following argument: *That person must be smart; after all, she goes to college.*

Claim

The claim is the assertion that the argument backs up. It's what you want to prove. In the above argument the claim is *That person must be smart.*

Evidence

Evidence is support for your claim that the audience accepts without further proof: the specific example, the statistic, the fact, the next logical step, the quotation, or a *premise* that allows the conclusion expressed by the claim. If the premises are adequate, you can logically infer the claim. In the above argument the evidence is *after all, she goes to college.*

Warrant

A warrant holds the argument together, linking the evidence to the claim. Sometimes, as in the above example, it is not expressed, only implied. It is the background assumption that implicitly completes the statement "This evidence supports this claim because" In the above argument the warrant is *People who go to college are smart.*

Backing

Backing shores up a warrant. When you cannot assume your audience will accept that your warrant is true, you need to prove it. To do this, you treat the warrant as a claim that needs evidence.

Example of Backing: *We know that people who go to college are smart because getting into college requires high test scores and excellent high school performance, both of which constitute evidence of intelligence.*

Rebuttal

At all stages of the argument, you should consider arguments that might be made against your position. Whenever these arguments appear strong, you might want to acknowledge them explicitly so that you can refute them. In the case of the above backing, someone might well argue against your claims, saying, "It is inaccurate to suppose that all students who go to college are smart. Test scores don't prove much; they were established to predict success in the first year of college, not to measure intelligence. Besides, to speak of people who are smart is not the same as to speak of people who are intelligent, and I've met lots of intelligent college students who don't act very smart at all."

When such a counterargument appears strong, you may wish to rebut it. Rebuttal is the process of refuting the opposing view. In essence, it says, "People who say X are wrong because . . ." It is important in rebuttal to take seriously the opposing arguments and not to engage in *ad hominem* argument, one that argues against the person rather than the position.

Example of rebuttal: *Those who doubt that college students are smart may discount the evidence of test scores or argue that test scores are not reliable or sufficient evidence of intelligence. They point out that the tests like the SAT and ACT were established not to measure intelligence, but rather to measure the likelihood of a person's success during the first year of college. This argument may have validity, but it unnecessarily complicates the useful common understanding of the word "smart."*

These doubters also challenge the notion that the definition of "intelligence" corresponds exactly to the definition of the word "smart." Again, while it is true that the two words do not mean exactly the same thing, they are commonly used interchangeably.

Finally, these people point out that their personal social interactions with specific individuals do not support the notion that those individuals are smart. To answer this argument, we must recognize that, while we've all met smart individuals who do not act as if they were smart, those individual anecdotes cannot outweigh the evidence of years of test scores.

Concession and qualification:

When you cannot find a way to refute the opposition, admit it. Your argument will be stronger if your reasoning shows that you have carefully considered the case made by the opposition and adjusted your argument to it.

Example of Concession: *It is true that standardized tests and high school performance are not always accurate measures of intelligence, nor do they measure all kinds of intelligence. In addition, not all students at college score high on standardized tests, nor do they all have strong high school records.*

Example of Qualification: *To say that a person who goes to college must necessarily be smart is certainly an oversimplification. To the extent that we accept that standardized tests and high*

school performance measure intelligence, and to the extent to which we believe that the words intelligent and smart are interchangeable, we can probably safely assume that people who go to college are smart and thus that the individual mentioned in the claim is smart. But perhaps more usefully, we should admit, as Becker points out in his work on multiple intelligences, that a person may be intelligent in many ways, from musically to athletically to socially, not just in those ways measured by standardized tests. Thus, even if we agree that a person who goes to college must be smart, we have not reached a very useful conclusion.

Notice how far we've come from the simple argument "*She must be smart; after all, she goes to college.*" Analyzing this argument in terms of claim, evidence, warrant, backing, rebuttal, concession and qualification reveals some of the complex assumptions behind a seemingly simple statement.

Definitions taken from Packer and Timpane, Writing Worth Reading, 122-142

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