

Toulmin's Ideas About Argument

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In 1958, Stephen Toulmin, originally a British logician and now a professor at University of Southern California, spelled out what he considered the basic elements of an argument. The **First Triad** of his model consists of three basic elements: The **CLAIM**, the **SUPPORT** and the **WARRANT**.

Claim: The claim is the main idea, or thesis, that you are focusing on. Basically, the claim answers the question, "What's your point? Why does it matter?"

One claim I make in my syllabus is that the portfolio system allows you to be graded on your best work.

Support: The support are the statements given to back up your claim. This may take many forms: facts, data, personal experience, expert opinion, evidence from other texts and sources, emotional appeals. The more reliable and comprehensive your support, the more likely your audience is to accept your claim.

I support my claim about the portfolio system by referring to "experts" whose actions give evidence that my argument is true, mostly gained from personal experience and the directions of my department.

Warrant: The warrants are the beliefs, values, inferences, and/or experiences that you are assuming your audience has in common with you. If your audience doesn't have the assumptions you are making about your support, then it won't be effective.

The syllabus relies on a number of assumptions. One is that you will trust my knowledge of writing. Another is that you wouldn't automatically assume that the portfolio system is best. I also assume that you care about how you are graded and that you can understand the way I write.

1. Someone warns you, "Don't eat that mushroom—it's poisonous!"

Claim: You shouldn't eat that mushroom.

Support: The mushroom is poisonous.

Warrants: You aren't immune to poisonous mushrooms.
You want to live.
You don't know it's poisonous.
You trust my knowledge of mushrooms...

2. Two women are talking. One says to the other: "You'd better start watching your weight, or you'll never find yourself a man."

Claim: She needs to be careful not to gain anymore weight.

Support: She won't be able to find "a man" if she gets fat.

Warrants: She doesn't already have a man.
Men aren't attracted to fat women.
She wants to be in a relationship.
She's heterosexual.
She lives in a culture that values thinness.
That never finding a man is a bad thing.
That she is able to watch her weight (there isn't a medical reason, etc.)