Because of its complexity, argument is probably the most difficult form of discourse to teach. Composition teachers receive little help from most standard texts. A survey of composition texts reveals at best an abbreviated treatment of argument. The most commonly used approach to teaching argument is instruction in fallacies. This is a negative approach to argument (it tells students what not to do), and used alone, it fails to provide a positive sense of the necessary constituents of argument. Some teachers of composition attempt to provide a more direct approach through instruction in syllogistic reasoning. Yet many complaints are voiced against this approach, in part because of its burdensome complexity but more importantly because logically valid syllogistic arguments are rarely found in rhetorical discourse. Rhetoric deals in probabilities and relies on inductive modes or generalizations based on inductive processes.¹

Difficulties with syllogistic logic and its usefulness as a heuristic device for the invention of rhetorical argument are shared by Speech and English. Recently, speech instruction has largely abandoned the syllogistic paradigm, and most recent texts in public speaking, argumentation, and persuasion are now using a model of argument developed by the philosopher, Stephen Toulmin.² This essay is intended to explain the Toulmin model of argument and to suggest its utility as a teaching tool.

I

Stephen Toulmin, in The Uses of Argument (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), indicates that "the science of logic has throughout its history tended to develop in a direction leading away . . . from practical questions about the manner in which we have occasion to handle and criticize arguments in different fields, and towards a condition of complete autonomy, in which logic becomes a theoretical study of its own" (p. 4). Toulmin is critical of the disjuncture of formal logic and the practical concerns of "real life" rhetorical argument. In the context of a general theory of argument, his model attempts to provide a working logic. In its simplest form, the model contains three elements:

DATA

Since, Warrant

So, Claim


An explicitly developed argument must exhibit these three elements. The claim is the conclusion of the argument and the point at issue in a controversy. The data is evidence for the claim. The Warrant provides the link which shows the relation between data and claim. Toulmin provides the following example of an argument of this structure:

Harry was born in Bermuda  
So, Harry is a British subject

Since,  
A man born in Bermuda will be a British subject.

Arguments are not always explicitly developed in rhetorical discourse. Warrants, in particular, are frequently implicit. Yet in controversial arguments, implicit warrants are likely to be challenged to become explicit and to be defended.

Because of this likely challenge and the probabilistic nature of rhetorical arguments, Toulmin found it necessary to develop a more complex model. Erwin P. Bettinghaus provides a useful schematic of the fully-developed model\(^3\) (see below): The three additional elements in this model are qualifier, reservation, and backing. The qualifier is usually an acknowledgment of the probabilistic nature of the claim, the reservation specifies conditions in which the warrant does not apply, the backing supports or justifies the warrant.

To illustrate this more complex form in a non-diagrammatic way, I have modified an argument from Brockreide and Ehninger:\(^4\)

---


(DATA) The historical consensus of opinion is that an unstable balance of power led to World War I. (DATA) World leaders today recognize that nuclear weapons are creating an imbalance of power. (CLAIM) Therefore, nuclear weapons development (QUALIFIER) might lead to World War III, (WARRANT) since the imbalance resulting from continued development would be essentially similar to the power imbalance prior to World War I. (BACKING) Both imbalances were characterized by an arms race and dynamic power blocks. (RESERVATION) Our only hope is that fear of a nuclear war will be an effective deterrent.

Although the substance of the argument is debatable (rhetorical arguments usually are), the important point is that by explicitly following the model, a qualified and supported argument results. Because the functional elements of the Toulmin model are present in the explicit argument, the imputed relation between claim and evidence can be more easily grasped and more specifically criticized.

In a more extended argumentative essay, a chain of arguments might have been developed. Several paragraphs might be used to argue the accuracy of the data through historical evidence and the use of authoritative opinion to establish the “factualness” of the data. More detailed enumeration of the similarities between the current situation and those preceding World War I could be developed to strengthen the backing. A coherent essay could result from the development of each functional element of the Toulmin model in the kernel argument and from tying the interrelated claims together in a conclusion.5

II

Besides providing a more understand-

5See Rieke and Sillars, pp. 87-88 for a discussion and a schematic display of chained arguments.

able model of argument than syllogistic logic and a useful heuristic for developing an argumentative essay, the Toulmin model is also useful in discourse analysis and in teaching the “logical” outline. The diagram can be profitably applied to many speeches and essays, and the examination of implicit missing elements can be especially interesting.

To illustrate the potential usefulness of the Toulmin model in discourse analysis, I will apply the model to the first paragraph of Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience.” For ease of reference, each sentence of the paragraph will be numbered.

1. I heartily accept the motto, “That government is best which governs least”; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically.
2. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe, “That government is best which governs not at all”; and when men are prepared for it that will be the kind of government they will have.
3. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient.
4. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government.
5. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government.
6. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it.
7. Witness the present Mexican War, the work of a comparatively few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

In analyzing this paragraph as an argument, one looks for its structure in terms
of the way in which the functional elements of the Toulmin model are related—i.e. one is looking for claim, warrant, data, etc. and how they are related. I am going to diagram a simplified form of Thoreau’s argument. (Sentence numbers in which the functional elements of the Toulmin model are apparent in the paragraph from Thoreau will be placed in parentheses below the statement.)

CLAIM I. A national program of health care should be adopted.

WARRANT A. A national program is necessary to deal with the magnitude of the problem.

DATA

We are in a war to which the people would not have consented. (7)

Since,

WARRANT Governments are inexpedient (3)

BACKING Arguments against a standing army also apply to a standing government. (4, 5, 6)

One interesting observation about this argument is that there is no reservation. For Thoreau, the warrant is absolute, and less government or no government is only a matter of waiting until the time “men are prepared for it.”

The Toulmin model treats the overall functional relations of the claim and provides insight into the structure of the argument. The model requires a holistic approach, which forces the analyst to determine the claim and then how other material in the discourse is utilized to develop and support that claim.

Another use for the model as a teaching tool is its application to the “logical” outline. The application is very simple. It amounts to giving students the following instructions after they have been taught the model: (1) Roman-numeral levels should function as data or backing. An outline structured in this pattern would look something like this:

CLAIM I. A national program of health care should be adopted.

WARRANT A. A national program is necessary to deal with the magnitude of the problem.

DATA 1. Millions of people cannot afford health care.

DATA 2. States, localities, and charities cannot afford to provide for so many people.

WARRANT B. A national program is a moral imperative.

DATA 1. The results of inadequate health care are unnecessary death and suffering for millions.

BACKING 2. Failing to act to correct this problem when we are capable of doing so leaves us morally responsible.

BACKING 3. Do unto others
When such a procedure is followed by students, it does not guarantee that they will produce satisfactory arguments. It may be that they do not provide sufficient data, that the warrant fails to adequately link the data to the claim, that the claim is too general and needs greater qualification, etc. But the important point is that *how they are arguing will be clearer*. The outline helps the student see relationships between parts of the argument and helps the teacher to criticize the argument more specifically.

*University of Texas at San Antonio*

---

**Grades**

This time of year, students like small birds wait in the hall outside my office. The sparrows at my winter feeder seem to me more tame, less nervous.

I would scatter letters at their feet, watch them squawk, scratch, and peck away, squabbling with each other over who gets F or D, C, B, or A.

But I may not. I invite them in and to each lordly I dispense as I see fit, knowing my distaste for the act is little recompense.

Richard Behm

*University of Wisconsin—Stevens Point*