Using the Toulmin Model of Argument in the Classroom

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In his 1958 book, *The Uses of Argument*, British philosopher Stephen Toulmin presented a method for analyzing argument based on what he calls a jurisprudential model. Because this model can help bring to students a clear understanding of rhetoric and argument, we should consider its use in the classroom, since those are crucial subjects in the AP English Language and Composition course.

To begin, students need to understand the words *argument* and *rhetoric* apart from their common associations. Is rhetoric the use of language to mislead or manipulate, as popular use would have it, or is it "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation," as Kenneth Burke says? And is argument a conflict in language, a contest between opposing verbal forces, a discussion involving disagreement, a contentious or disputatious quarrel, or is it rather a process of reasoned inquiry, of rational discourse seeking mutual ground? If the latter, then we engage in argument whenever we think clearly about the world.

Students need to engage the audience, encouraging the reader to consider the positions they present as reasonable and perhaps valuable, in a voice felt as reasoned, trustworthy, and honorable, using the classic appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos. Especially important for our students to recognize is that the reasonable voice is usually a qualified one. We would probably agree that nearly all effective arguments are qualified ones. Students need not only to anticipate objections to their positions but also to recognize and respect complexity itself. A reasonable voice sees not two sides to an issue but multiple perspectives, and that voice presents an argument as the conclusion of a logical process. Students quickly discover the features of an immature argument and come to appreciate the dissuasive effect of extreme or one-sided positions and highly dyslogistic language. That "senior year is a complete waste of time" or that "Sontag's position is stupid" is not likely to be effective with the reader. Students need to discover their own extreme positions and to question the validity of their own warrants.

**Types of Argument**

Before applying Toulmin's method, it is good to teach students about the different types of argument. Typically, we speak of three: those of fact, of value, and of policy.
Arguments of fact state that something is or is not the case. Causal arguments say that one event or condition leads to another or is likely to. For example, we might argue that AP students do better in college, that computers enhance learning in the classroom, that the media is responsible for the shortening of the attention span, or that mercury in the food chain or cigarette smoke in the air causes cancer.

Arguments of value state that something is or is not desirable. They involve evaluations of quality or worth according to accepted criteria. For example, one might assert that this or that novel or film is of significant merit, that preemptive war is or is not a justifiable practice, that Bill Clinton was or was not a good president, that health concerns take precedence over profit.

Arguments of policy state that something should or should not be done. They make recommendations for practice or implementation. For example, that the minimum wage should be increased, that stem cell research should be funded, that *Huck Finn* should or should not be part of the curriculum, that gay marriage should or should not be legalized, that more students should have access to AP, that the designated hitter should be eliminated from baseball (one of the finest arguments I saw at the 2004 AP English Language Reading, by the way), or that smoking should be banned from public places. This kind of argument will naturally contain components—often included as support—of those of fact and value, as my final example in each category illustrates.

The Toulmin Model

Because the Toulmin model for argument analysis is widely recognized for its utility as an analytical tool, it might seem more applicable as a reading than a writing heuristic, since it enables students to understand the nature of sophisticated arguments that they read on account of the logical process it prescribes. But because of that new knowledge, it also serves in the teaching of composition, since students can apply knowledge from one area to another. The model is at work in this paragraph and in the first sentence of this article, as we will see. Its components are as follows:

A claim is an assertion. It should seem a "conclusion whose merits we are seeking to establish," in Toulmin's words, or "the conclusion you reach after testing the evidence that supports your belief," as Kathleen Bell puts it in *Developing Arguments*.

The support consists of the data used as evidence, reasons, or grounds for the claim.

A warrant expresses the assumption necessarily shared by the speaker and the audience.
Similar to the second premise of a syllogism, it serves as a guarantee, linking the claim to the support.

**Backing** consists of further assurances or data without which the warrant lacks authority.

A **qualifier**, when used (e.g., “usually,” “probably,” “in most cases,” “most likely”), restricts the terms of the claim and limits its range, indicating the degree of strength delivered by the warrant.

A **reservation** explains the terms and conditions necessitated by the qualifier.

A **rebuttal** gives voice to objections, providing the conditions that might refute or rebut the warranted claim.

The following diagram illustrates the Toulmin model:

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Data ----------------------> Claim

↑ Warrant               ↑ Qualifier               ↑ Reservation

↑ Backing
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Toulmin states it this way: *Data, so (qualifier) claim, since warrant, on account of backing, unless reservation.* A good classroom model is that used by Annette Rottenberg and Kathleen Bell and others: Because (data as support), therefore, or so (qualifier?) (claim), since (warrant), because, or on account of (backing), unless (reservation).

Students find the form to be highly useful once they get it, although it isn’t easy at first. It is good practice to begin in class with a simple illustration. For example, at the board the teacher might write, “Because it is raining, I should take my umbrella,” demonstrating support for a claim. The teacher would ask the students to supply the warrant: “since it will keep *me* dry.” Students immediately recognize the tacit assumption given explicit expression in the warrant. They will then provide the backing, “that the material is impervious or waterproof,” and the reservation, “unless there is a hole in it.” The following diagram illustrates this argument—a simple one indeed, but one that demonstrates the process.
Data (It is raining.) → Claim (I should take my umbrella.)

↑
Warrant
(It will keep me dry.)

↑
Qualifier
(Probably.)

↑
Reservation
(Unless it has a hole in it.)

↑
Backing
(The material is impervious or waterproof.)

"Because it is raining, I should probably take my umbrella, since it will keep my head dry on account of its impervious or waterproof material, unless, of course, there is a hole in it." Students will note how the model gives expression to the usually unspoken but necessary assumption included in the warrant. Once they understand the process—once they understand the attitudes and values that allow or enable or cause the problem, and they practice using substantive data to support their claims—students will move to more complex issues and more sophisticated arguments.

Sample Argument Assignment Using Toulmin

Recently my students completed a persuasive essay on an educational issue of importance. We began by reading several selections of contemporary social criticism, including provocative pieces from Harper's Magazine by Francine Prose, Jerry Jesness, Christopher Hitchens, and John Taylor Gatto; the New York Times by Leon Botstein and Douglas Martin; Newsweek and the Washington Post by Jay Mathews; the Atlantic Monthly by Matthew Miller; and several others. In groups, students selected a particularly engaging passage, analyzing it according to the SOAPS (subject, occasion, audience, purpose, speaker) and the "Yes/No But..." strategies from the College Board's Pre-AP publications and workshops, and then the Toulmin model.

They used the following sentence construction: "Because_______, therefore,_______, since_______, on account of_______." In the successive blanks, they wrote their support, their claim, the warrant, and the backing. After discussion with the whole class, the students constructed an argument prompt (using past AP Exams as models) in response to the piece and then developed a thesis.
For example, here is one student’s prompt from this year:

Carefully read the following passage from “Against School: How Public Education Cripples Our Kids and Why,” by former New York State Teacher of the Year and author John Taylor Gatto, published in Harper’s Magazine. Then write an essay in which you support, refute, or qualify Gatto’s claim that public education trains children to be mass consumer robots and ultimately limits growth potential. Use appropriate evidence to develop your position.

The student developed a thesis and wrote that essay as a draft. Beginning with that draft, each student wrote a documented argument of 3 to 5 pages using his or her own observation, experience, and at least two of the sources that I provided and one additional one from research. The application of Toulmin to the texts read encouraged the critical use of sources. Then, as students drafted their essays, application of the Toulmin model to their own work helped to bring cogence to their positions.

Student Samples

The following example demonstrates the process for a student’s analysis of an argument that he has read—in this case, an essay by Michael Rock about the increased visual nature of our print media, including textbooks. Applying the Toulmin construction, the student’s analysis presents Rock’s argument as follows: “Because textbook authors are filling their books with charts, graphs, and pictures, therefore education is declining in this country, since less written information equals less learning.”

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{Data} & \quad \text{Claim} \\
(\text{Textbooks contain charts, graphs, pictures.}) & \quad (\text{Education is declining.}) \\
\uparrow \text{Warrant} & \\
(\text{Learning comes from written text.}) \\
\uparrow \text{Backing} & \\
(\text{Traditionally, students have been learning from written text.})
\end{align*} \]
Special Focus: 
Writing Persuasively

Studying the argument this way, the student finds that he questions Rock's warrant. Then the student casts his own response into the model as well: "Because graphs, charts, and pictures provide information, they do not hinder the education system, since that information is a supplement to written text." In this case, he does not include a qualifier or reservation.

Data  
(Graphs, charts, and pictures provide info.)

Claim  
(Visuals do not hinder education.)

↑
Warrant
(Visual information supplements written text.)

↑
Backing
(Students learn from a variety of media.)

The student then uses that information as he writes his own essay. As he presents his claim, he doesn't argue with Rock's data. He acknowledges its validity, as far as it goes (effecting a reasonable voice through its appeal to logos and pathos), and then zeros in on the warrant with a pair of rhetorical questions: "Much of Rock's argument is indisputable; however, some of it can be interpreted in different ways. Take, for instance, his criticism of textbooks for using too many visuals, particularly of a map replacing a topographical description. Is the map really a bad thing? Are any of the charts and graphs a bad thing?" [sic] This student goes on to argue the value of visuals not as replacements for, but as supplements to, written text—developing a qualified and reasoned argument.

(We recognize that the language of the Toulmin model works well as an exercise only. It shouldn't be maintained in the students' writing. In this essay, for example, the student rephrases some of the artificial constructions and awkward phrasings: "because," "therefore," "since." )

Another student addresses a similar issue, that of "teaching to the test" (a favorite target of students), and casts her claim into the model. She reasons that "because teachers are modifying lesson plans to teach only to a specific test, therefore students are losing the ability to think deeply about concepts, since such specialized teaching does not allow a child to learn any more about a topic on a broader or deeper scale, unless teachers are able to teach to the test while still incorporating additional enriching material." The reservation she presents at the end is one that might well appeal to teachers; indeed it is one that can make an effective appeal in the written argument.
Finally, since not only nonfiction and argument but also creative literature effect a rhetorical transaction, the following example from a student essay results from the application of the Toulmin model to a novel. Arguing the case for Tim O'Brien's method, one student writes:

_The Things They Carried_ is not an accurate depiction of the Vietnam War, but rather a portrayal of personal truth—what the war meant to the soldiers and how it changed them. O'Brien is trying to bridge the gap between the soldier and the audience. This chapter ("How to Tell a True War Story") is important to the story as a whole because it undermines the conventions of storytelling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Claim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(The selected chapter undermines the conventions of storytelling.)</td>
<td>(It is important to the story as a whole.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

↑

Warrant

(The novel's unconventional narrative structure is a significant feature of its literary merit.)

(The selected chapter demonstrates that significance.)

↑

Backing

(Narrative method is an important feature of fiction.)

(The content, style, rhetoric, and theme of the chapter)

In this case, the warrants and their backing indicate what will become the substance of the body of the essay. Arguing that the story, and not the war, is O'Brien's subject, her essay concludes, "It is in this way that true war stories are never about war. They are about love, memories, and sorrow—the heaviest things they had to carry."
Conclusion

If we were to apply the Toulmin model to itself, we might see the following:

Data \rightarrow \text{Claim (Teachers should use it with students.)}

- The Toulmin model is logical.
- It establishes the connection between data and the claim it supports.
- It reveals assumptions that must be shared with the audience.
- It is easy to apply.
- It helps students to analyze arguments.
- It helps students to write cogent arguments.

\[ \text{Warrant} \]

- Ease of practice is a desirable feature of any effective heuristic method.
- Logical thinking, increased close reading ability, and cogent writing are desirable qualities of learning, especially in the AP English courses.
- Teachers would do well to try a method that engenders these features.

Our students hold adamant opinions; they express strong views. We know that presentation of such opinions can foster either heated dispute or the sort of resigned acceptance suggested by these lines from a song by Bob Dylan: “You are right from your side / I am right from mine / We’re both just one too many mornings / And a thousand miles behind.” We wish to teach our students to engage argument actively and logically, to avoid such dead ends as these and instead find “symbolic means of inducing cooperation,” as Kenneth Burke says. In Stephen Toulmin’s work we find one effective method for doing this. In practice we discover that the Toulmin model is especially useful not only for analysis of text but also for its ability to engender cogent arguments that are both reasoned and reasonable.