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Argument and the Toulmin Model of Argument (Podcast Transcript)



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Greetings everyone. I am Kurtis Clements from Kaplan University's Composition Department with an effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to discuss argument and structure and take a look at the Toulmin Model of Argument.

Let's start with a practical question: What exactly is meant by argument? For some, the word argument conjures up a heated verbal disagreement between two people replete with shouting and arm-waving and general unpleasantness. We've all had those kinds of arguments. In the academic world, however, argument tends to be much more civilized, meaning nothing more than one's opinion on a topic or issue. In a very real sense, just about everything's an argument. Now, one's opinion, or argument, needs to be thoughtfully presented and developed for an audience who may not share the writer's view. Credible evidence needs to be integrated. Sound logic needs to be employed. And steps need to be taken to convince an audience that what the writer claims to be true is, in fact, true, or at least it has merit and is worthy of consideration.

I know the analogy has been used before, but a good way to think about writing argument is to image that you are a lawyer arguing your case before a jury. In such a scenario, you would make a claim to the jury—not guilty!—and carefully build your case by presenting one compelling piece of evidence after another. You are trying to argue your case and persuade the jury to believe your client is innocent or that there is a reasonable doubt that he is guilty. Makes sense, right? Ok, so how do you do it? How do you convince an audience that what you claim to be true is, in fact, true? While there is truth to the saying that it's easier said than done, with careful attention to the nature of argument and a good plan of development, you can learn how to make a good argument.

First things first—you have to be aware of the language of argument. The wording needs to be such that it is clear to your audience that you have a strong view about a particular issue and that you want others to see the value in what you have to say. You need to be aware of the words you use and how you express your ideas to be effective.

Let's look at an example of a thesis for an argumentative essay:

Statistics show that many homeless people have mental instabilities that are not being treated which often leads to violence.

Thoughts? Good, bad, somewhere in between? The sentence does make a declarative statement, but is it an argumentative statement? What words in the sentence suggest an

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argument? Does the sentence get at what the writer is going to try to prove? And the answer is: This thesis is a start, but as is, it does not yet express a focused and specific argument.

How about this thesis: The city of Lewiston, Maine, needs to provide better services for its homeless population because many homeless people have medical and mental conditions that are going untreated; some suffer from psychological disorders that could put themselves and others at risk, and many do not have the skills or resources to make them more employable.

Is this thesis statement better? Well, it's certainly more specific (as well as longer). What does this thesis claim to be true about its subject? The claim needs to be clear and it needs to use language that reflects the purpose is to argue. The claim this thesis makes is that Lewiston, Maine, needs to provide better services for its homeless population. Note the word "needs," which in this context suggests that something is not being done that should. Is the statement an outright fact or is it someone's opinion? Will there be disagreement and room for debate? Does the thesis assert a position on an issue? I think it's safe to say the thesis is, indeed, argumentative. It asserts a position on an issue. There will be disagreement. The statement is opinion based. It's a thesis that clearly reflects its argumentative purpose.

Ok, so let's talk about how to put together an argument. A variety of structural models exist, such as the Classical Argument, Rogerian Argument, and the Toulmin Model of Argument. In this podcast, I'm going to focus on the practical aspects of the Toulmin Model.

What the Toulmin Model of Argument affords the writer is a framework for constructing and examining an argument. The Toulmin Model has three essential parts--the claim, the grounds, and warrants. There are more complicated renditions of the Toulmin Model, but I want to focus only on these essential parts.

Let's take a look at each part, but please don't get too hung up on the terminology, as I am sure that you have been working with claims, grounds, and warrants even if you didn't use those terms.

The claim is simply the statement the writer makes about the topic. Since we are talking about the framework for an argumentative essay, the claim is the argument the writer makes about the topic and will be reflected in the thesis.

The grounds is the evidence. It's what supports the argument. The grounds can be personal experience, examples, facts, testimony, statistics, studies, and the like.

The warrant is the assumption, or belief, the writer has in mind when forming an argument. The underlying assumption is generally not stated but, rather, implicit in the argument.

Let me illustrate the three parts of a Toulmin Model argument with this statement: Youth soccer players ten years old and under should not be allowed to head the ball because of the

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risk of getting a concussion.

Ok, so what's the claim? Easy enough, right? The claim is the argument. In this example, the argument is that youth soccer players ten years old or under should not be allowed to head the ball.

So what's the grounds, or evidence? The claim is that soccer players ten years old and under should not be allowed to head the ball, and the reason for this view, the grounds, is because of the risk of getting a concussion.

And what about the underlying assumption, or the warrant? Remember, the warrant is usually not an expressed part of the argument, but it is the underlying basis of the argument. In this example, certainly an underlying assumption the writer has is that people are concerned about the safety of children playing youth soccer (and perhaps youth sports in general).

Make sense?

Let's look at another example.

Here's a thesis from earlier in this podcast: The city of Lewiston, Maine, needs to provide better services for its homeless population because many homeless people have medical and mental conditions that are going untreated; some suffer from psychological disorders that could put themselves and others at risk, and many do not have the skills or resources to make them more employable.

And the claim is? The claim this thesis makes is the city of Lewiston, Maine, needs to provide better services for its homeless population.

What are the grounds? (Remember, the grounds refers to the evidence.) In this example, the grounds, or reasons in support of the claim, is that many homeless people have medical and mental conditions that are going untreated; homeless people suffer from psychological disorders that could put themselves and others at risk, and many homeless people do not have the skills or resources to make them more employable.

What is the underlying assumption or the warrant? One assumption could be that not enough is currently being done to help the homeless population. Is that a valid assumption? I am not asking whether or not you agree with this assumption; rather, is the assumption a sound, logical statement? Yes, the assumption is valid. I pose this question because sometimes the underlying assumption of an argument is faulty and if that is the case, then the argument itself will be flawed.

For example, let's say you're having a conversation with a coworker who tells you about an article he read in the newspaper about solar power. Your coworker scoffs at the idea of solar

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power, something he dubs “tree-hugger technology.” He rails on about the various reasons he dislikes solar power, offering one snarky remark after another and taking potshots along the way at those who see solar power as a viable form of alternative energy. In this example, the underlying assumption your coworker makes is that you will agree with what he has to say—otherwise, it’s unlikely he would be so insensitive to an opposing view. Right? I’m sure all of you have had a similar experience in which someone expresses a view on a topic in a way that assumes you share that someone’s view. If the underlying assumption is incorrect, it can make for a most awkward experience.

What the Toulmin Model of Argument offers the writer is a way to think about and structure one’s argument. The model breaks down the key parts of an argument so that the argument can be as clear and precise and thought out as possible. I hope you find the Toulmin Model of Argument a useful tool when writing or analyzing an argumentative essay.

Happy writing.