

TERMS IN A TOULMIN ARGUMENT

Many writers of arguments look to terminology developed by philosopher Stephen Toulmin to describe the elements of an argumentative essay. You can use these to check that your argument has all the key ingredients it needs to be successful.

A **claim** (proposition, thesis): answers the questions “What point will your paper try to make?” or “What belief or opinion is the author defending?” To be **credible** to an audience, claims must usually be supported with specific evidence. For instance, a writer may claim that “Standardized tests are biased against female and minority students.” In a Toulmin argument, readers ask, “How do you know that is true?” or “What is that based on?” Such questions are challenging the writer to prove the claim with **support**. In order to defuse an audience’s potential challenges, some writers use **qualifiers** to clarify their claims and protect their credibility. Acknowledging that the claim may not be absolute protects them from proving that their claim is true in every case. **Qualifiers** are usually adverbs that modify the verb in the claim or adjectives that modify a key noun; some common ones are *typically, usually, for the most part, some, several, few, and sometimes*. Qualified version of the first claim might be “Many standardized texts are biased against female and minority students” or “Standardized tests are sometimes biased against female and minority students.” Either of these, because of the limiting qualifiers, are easier to prove than the unqualified claim.

Support (evidence, backing) is the examples, facts, and data that aid in proving the claim’s validity. Depending on who your audience is, this evidence could also include emotional appeals, quotations from famous people or recognized experts, or statements based on the writer’s personal credibility. In the argument on test bias, readers might expect to see statistics that prove the text questions are biased, samples of misleading questions, quotations from educators and testing experts, and testimony from students who have taken such tests. All of these might be good kinds of support, depending on the identity of the audience.

Underlying the claims in Toulmin arguments are **warrants**, the inferences or assumptions that are taken for granted by the writer (and sometimes by the argument). Warrants connect (conspicuously or inconspicuously) the claim and the support: they derive from our cultural experiences and personal observations. For instance, if over the last five years, girls at Madison High have received higher grades than boys in every subject and yet the Madison boys consistently score higher on the SAT than the girls do, someone might claim that the SAT was biased against girls. The **warrant** for this claim is the belief that something must be preventing the girls from showing their academic excellence on the SAT.

Finally, a key point in Toulmin arguments is the **concession**, which brings differing opinions together by acknowledging a part of the opposing argument that cannot be refuted. Conceding that an opposing point is valid and then building upon it to further one’s own claim allows a writer to make the audience feel appreciated without giving up her or his own position. For instance, in the SAT argument, the writer might concede that other reasons, like test anxiety or fewer math courses, lower girls’ scores on the text, but go on to provide evidence that even when these factors are considered, the questions are written in such a way as to favor boys. If the writer can discredit the opposition’s counter-arguments by proving their logic is faulty, their support is weak or their warrants are invalid, he or she has created a **rebuttal** that supports his or her own original position and furthers his or her claim.