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# Text As Topos: Using the Toulmin Model of Argumentation in Introduction to Literature

*An adaptation of the Toulmin argumentation model improves discussion in introduction to literature classes.*

by William Jolliff

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## Introduction

One of the pleasures of teaching an introduction to literature course is that it allows us to live many hours of our lives in an arena where ultimate issues are on the table—discussed by people who are hard at work creating new identities for themselves, trying on words to hear how they sound, and testing the temperature of various ideological waters. Like many, I've worked to create in my classrooms a safe and stimulating place where basic values and beliefs can be considered freely, and where a level of acceptance is guaranteed. As a result, if I am sufficiently pleasant and encouraging and personally engaging, many of my forty-plus students will attend regularly for at least the first few weeks of the term. And if they feel unthreatened, some will eventually share heart-felt impressions of the day's text. Then along about the fourth week—if I risk giving the critical/pedagogical screw another turn—a few will even begin to respond to my questions, *my carefully incremented questions*, in ways that imitate the progress of my own discourse. Thus we will have, if not a hearty literary discussion, at least a kind of lecture delivered antiphonally.

This is good, but it's not good enough. And since it's not good enough, I must

ask myself, "Why not?" and "What is?"

It may be that mutual acceptance is not a full enough classroom tone to create authentic engagement in a literary discussion. Indeed, I often wonder if the acceptance voiced, by me or by my students, is present in fact, or if what really obtains is a particular kind of sophisticated, though not self-conscious, political positioning—positioning that gives a class discussion the appearance of being honest and engaged, when it is, in fact, only genteel. Because I suspect the latter is often the case, I am working to develop a more authentic classroom by teaching first-year literature students how to fight—how to fight with others, how to fight with ideas, and finally, I hope, how to fight with themselves. The keyword is *how*. Most of my students have apparently seldom witnessed how real argument works, and I can't spend a month each semester on informal logic. What I need is an easily teachable, easily usable, easily portable tool for making and thinking about arguments that use textual evidence; to fit these criteria, I've developed an application of the work of British logician Stephen Toulmin.

As the volume of scholarly citation suggests, both the strengths and weaknesses of Toulmin's method, at least as it relates to teaching composition and com-

munication, are well known.<sup>1</sup> Overlooked, however, has been how useful Toulmin argumentation can be as a tool for analyzing literary texts and for empowering literary discussion—especially with beginning students.<sup>2</sup> Be assured that I do not here wish to apply the Toulmin method to the shimmery critical jousting for which the field of literary studies has become in/famous. Quite the contrary, I have no interest in Toulmin’s model that cannot be appreciated by an 18-year-old who really doesn’t like to read all that much and who, at least in introduction to literature, certainly does not shimmer. That student must be the measure of how any approach to raising the level of discourse—the quality of class discussion—really works.

## The Method

Toulmin’s method consists of making a claim, supporting that claim with data, and demonstrating the applicability of the data to the claim by using a warrant or warrants. By way of definition, the claim is an assertion, a statement of fact that may be called into question—in the literature classroom, the claim will likely be an interpretive hypothesis. The datum is “the ground which we produce as support for the original assertion” (Toulmin *Uses* 97), the first term of the traditional enthymeme. In introduction to literature, the data are simply the words on the page. The warrant, however, is slightly trickier to define. The role of the warrant is, in Toulmin’s words, “to authorize the sort of step to which our particular argument commits us.” Thus warrants are “rules, principles, inference licenses”—the pieces of an argument that are usually left unstated because they are already held in agreement (*Uses* 98).

Those are the three central terms of the Toulmin model, but there are three more:

qualifier, reservation, and backing. As Charles Kneupper succinctly defines them, “[t]he 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” (Kneupper 238). Before moving on to a literary example, it may help to take one from familiar (if counterfactual) academic history:

(QUALIFIER) Most likely (CLAIM) Dean Dullstone will soon be moving to a new position. (DATUM) The college annual report minuted his 25% staff cut, and you know as well as I do that (WARRANT) staff cuts are an incentive to leave here—(BACKING) that’s what happened when they dumped Dean Windyman. Not only that, but (DATUM) Trustee Buckmaster has been outspoken about the dean’s poor community relations skills. One thing I’ll say for Buckmaster, (WARRANT) he always acts on his opinions, and (WARRANT) he’s got plenty of clout. (BACKING) After all, he holds the Executive Committee meetings on his Montana ranch, and (BACKING) the last dean he didn’t like is now working there—in the stables. To make matters worse, (DATUM) Dean Dullstone hasn’t done a good job of sucking up to the rich Marlboro sisters, and (WARRANT) the college needs their goodwill to meet the budget—(BACKING) without it, the projected figures show us falling several thousand dollars short on the new media center campaign, and we know that all is fair in meeting campaign goals. And one more thing: (DATUM) Dean Dullstone’s house has a “For Sale” sign in the yard. So (RESERVATION) unless he changes his tune or (RESERVATION) unless I’m missing some pretty nifty politicking, (THE CLAIM AGAIN) he’ll soon be making a career change.

Put in this bare form, students have a relatively easy time developing a basic understanding of Toulmin’s terms. It’s worth the time invested to use several examples from

nonliterary experience before helping them apply the method to a text.

### Application to Literary Texts

We begin a classroom literary discussion with a claim about a text. I prefer to begin with a student's claim, so I make devising a claim or two part of the daily homework assignment. Though any assertion about a text can work, I most encourage interpretive statements about some aspect of the work. Of course specific, meticulously worded, finely tuned claims are the easiest to work with—something about a trope or something about style or something about the motivation of a particular character. As we all know, however, such refinement does not come easily, and first-year students tend to think in broader terms. But that's fine, since, as you will see, all the claims, large and small, eventually tie together.

In discussions of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, for example, a play frequently included in introductory anthologies, one of my students is apt to begin the first class day with the claim, *Nora should not have deserted her family*—an interpretive claim to be sure, and one that would have been readily accepted, if not by Ibsen, at least by the play's first viewers as they tore up their seats and tossed them on stage. And, from one point of view, there are plenty of data in the text to support this interpretive claim, not the least of which are the facts that

(A) *Nora had three dependent children at home*

and

(B) *she had made legal and moral vows to Torvald Helmer.*

Warrants come next, and in struggling for these on their own or in class, stu-

dents begin to understand what working warrants really are—shared assumptions, sometimes with a definite moral component. Warrants for the data above, for example, might be

(A) *a mother's first responsibility is to her children*

and

(B) *marriage vows are eternally binding.*

Many readers, of course, find this argument problematic, and that in itself points us to the communitarian nature of warranting: what warrants for one reader may not warrant for another. This difference becomes clear when, in the course of the *Doll House* discussion, another student inevitably makes the claim that *Nora is justified in leaving her family*, and uses such data as

(A) *Nora plays no significant maternal role in her children's lives*

and

(B) *the marriage was not really a marriage.*

The warrants for these claims might be,

(A) *playing with the children is, in itself, not a significant maternal role*

and

(B) *real marriage is not the possession of one spouse by the other.*

Clearly the realm of warrant has the possibility of precipitating some heartfelt discussions, and one might even suspect that at some point all kinds of civil, let alone logical, argument might regress into name-calling. Such need not be the case.

On the contrary, Toulmin model argumentation tends to be retrogressive, but in a positive sense. By "retrogressive," I mean that what functions as a datum for

one argument is often the claim of a logically prior argument. Thus students tend to work themselves deeper into the details of the text for data. And just as positively, as we consider the ideological implications of the literary classroom, examinations of warrants can force students to examine the values that they do or do not share in common with their classmates or with the characters in the text or with the author. These possibilities are the subjects of other studies, but here's one example: The datum, *Nora played no significant role in her children's lives*, must be used with the awareness that such a datum, in another argumentative formulation, becomes a claim that must be proven by data, and that as a datum, it too must be warranted. The datum that supports that claim might be *Nora's only time spent with the children was spent playing with them* and the warrant, *a significant parental role may include play but also, necessarily, nurture*. Of course it should be noted that this argument, too, is retrogressive. The datum easily becomes a claim in a logically prior argument, which too retrogresses into the text and into new warrants: the class's jointly shared—or not shared—assumptions. And by such retrogression, we continue our progress toward authentic discussion.

The retrogressive chain of reasoning followed above begins with what I call an interpretive claim, but it's important to note that other apparent kinds of claims are possible as we'll see. I use the word "apparent" because the first of these is technically not a claim at all. It does come up, however, so I've adapted the "claim" nomenclature. Begging the pardon of rhetoricians, I call it the factual claim. Introduction to literature students, as you all know, sometimes read assigned work yet fail to grasp the more subtle details of fact. So what I call factual claims are sim-

ply statements of what happens in the text, and they can be supported by page numbers and straight-forward explication. On quite the other end of the spectrum are what I call thematic claims, claims that go beyond the words on the page and into the area of theme, which, as Robert DiYanni notes, can be defined as "[t]he idea of a literary work abstracted from its details of language, character, and action, and cast in the form of a generalization" (DiYanni 1748). Into this area some better students tend anxiously and immediately to proceed, since they intuitively light upon themes, without grasping the idiosyncratic series of interpretive acts which have brought them to that level of abstraction. The strength of the Toulmin application outlined here is that it sends students right back into the text for the data to support their claims and into their knowledge of life to warrant them.

The paragraphs above encapsulate the heart of my adaption of the Toulmin method to classroom literary discourse. But Toulmin's program includes three other terms which can be helpful in an attempt to raise the level of discourse in introduction to literature. As defined above, "[t]he 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" (Kneupper 238). Here's how they apply to one of the *Doll House* arguments outlined above:

(BACKING) People who study and write about successful marriages will tell you that (WARRANT) marriage is not the possession of one spouse by the other. (DATA) In that case, given what we see of their relationship, the Torvalds didn't really have a marriage, per se. So, (QUALIFIER) presumably, (RESERVATION) unless I am misread-

ing some important part of the story or (RESERVATION) unless some cultural element is eluding me, (CLAIM) Nora was justified in leaving her family.

Of course, discussions usually begin with a claim. But here I've reversed the order to clarify the function, in particular, of the backing. For in this argumentation process, the backing supports, or logically precedes, the warrant, bearing the relationship to the warrant that the data bears to the claim.

An example from a somewhat more ambiguous text may help clarify how the whole process works. Bobbie Anne Mason's short story "Shiloh" appears in many introductory textbooks and seldom fails to elicit an active class discussion. As students reflect upon the events of the story in the contexts of their own lives and relationships, differences of opinion often come to the fore concerning the reasons behind the impending dissolution of Leroy and Norma Jean's marriage. On one level, sympathies for Leroy often arise—he arouses a certain degree of pity, and one easy response to the text is to vilify Norma Jean. In her defense, though, some student is likely to begin with the claim, *Though he didn't mean to do so, Leroy really drove Norma Jean away from their marriage.*

That's a good, specific interpretive claim, and supporting it or disproving it demands both a close attention to the text and some understanding of human relationships. Supporters of the claim will often supply such data as

- (A) *he masked his own desires in a pretense of building a house for her*
- (B) *he never outgrew his repulsive, "old hippie" habits*
- and
- (C) *he ignored her needs for years, then suddenly wanted all her attention.*

When asked to relate their data to their claim, students need to draw upon their own beliefs and experiences about how relationships do—and sometimes don't—work. Eventually they come up with warrants like these:

- (A) *people should be honest with themselves and with others about their purposes*
- (B) *people should change and mature with age*
- and
- (C) *relationships don't last without continual nurturing.*

Now if the classroom reasoning process gets even this far, it's a success. Indeed, I often need to remind myself that my purpose is to manage an authentic, text-centered discussion—not to build the perfect Toulmin argument. So instead of pushing immediately for the other three terms of the argument, it is sometimes an advantage to allow the discussion to take off on a related claim or two. With a little time and luck, another student is likely to take up the idea of change and make this related but more refined claim: *Norma Jean was growing, and Leroy was not—that's what broke up the marriage.* And the class may supply such data as these:

- (A) *Norma Jean was taking courses at her local community college*
- (B) *Norma Jean had started working out*
- and
- (C) *Leroy is stuck in—or keeps moving back to—the 1960s.*

Even before proceeding to the warrants, this may be a good time in the discussion to ask for additional textual proof. Students especially enjoy taking a few moments to find those details of the text

which show Leroy's fossilization. And as they are searching the work for the names of television shows and songs and what seem to them the peculiar 1960s practices of their parents and professors, they are also learning to pay attention to the texture Mason has so richly provided. Ultimately though, we need to go back to warrant our data, usually like this:

(A and B) *people who work on improving  
their bodies and minds are  
probably growing*

and

(C) *people who want to avoid dealing with  
current problems sometimes center  
their habits and thoughts on the past.*

With warrants clarified, the discussion can turn to a closer scrutiny of the argument we've developed and extend to the other three terms: qualification, reservations, and backing. The first two happen readily; most students, once familiar with the concept, are willing to qualify their claims, at least with an "I think" or "The text may indicate. . . ." Similarly, most can express reservations by imagining circumstances that might make their claims wrong—and if not, their disagreeing classmates will be more than glad to help them with a series of "but what if's." The backing is a little more complex, so it is worthwhile to emphasize again just how broad backing can be. As examples, Toulmin notes that "[a]ny given body of scientific theory, any given set of sporting records, any given corpus of legal statutes provides backing not just for one but for many different warrants and arguments" (*Introduction* 65). Thus, during the discussion of backing is a good time to encourage students to try to integrate material not only from their own experiences but from other college classes that they've taken. For example, students who are taking introduc-

tion to psychology, developmental psychology, or any class that deals with mental and physical health may be able to offer academic backing, "a body of scientific theory" which sheds light on Norma Jean's change and growth and Leroy's lack of both.

I was tempted in this essay, just as I am sometimes tempted in class, not to include these last three terms. After all, they do make the model a little more complex, and I have tacitly agreed with myself—and with the student trying "to get his gen ed stuff out of the way"—to omit the unnecessarily complex. But finally I do include them because they compel the contending students into doing the very things that students so often fail to do in their talk—and in their essays: (1) to qualify what they are saying with an awareness of the probabilistic nature of most knowledge, (2) to consider circumstances that might prove their understanding to be wrong, and (3) to realize that the education they are earning should not remain compartmentalized.

As I continue to apply this model, it seems to me to contain some genuine promise for raising the level of classroom discourse. In addition, several questions for further exploration present themselves, among them: (1) Are there assumptions that must be held about literature—assumptions that warrant happenings in literature—that are unique to literature or even to various kinds of literature without which our argument cannot continue; that is, are there warrants that are, to use Toulmin's term, "field-dependent" (*Introduction* 17)? (2) Might a brief taxonomy of literary warrants be developed to make that concept easier to understand and to apply? (3) Might the Toulmin method be applied to, say, lyric poetry, as easily as it can be applied to longer narrative forms which—because of

their plot-centered nature—respond more readily to inquiries concerning causality? And (4) in what other ways can my adaptation of the method be refined to enhance the sophistication of the classroom argument *without* becoming onerous to that student mentioned earlier, the one who “just wants to get his gen ed stuff out of the way”?

We’ll see. I suspect that if Stephen Toulmin happens into my introduction to literature classroom during the first week of September, he might not recognize the way his name is being used. His own application of the method to “arguing about the arts” (*Introduction* 349-69) was, after all, brief and paid little heed to the exigencies of the classroom. But if he comes by during October, he might hear something he would recognize. And if, in the

process of learning this tool, a few students also find that it has become somewhat more habitual to think clearly and even to write well organized and tightly reasoned papers, that’s a real plus. Finally, if they find that they listen to the radio with a slightly more critical ear—whether they’re listening to Rush Limbaugh or Studs Terkel—that’s a bonus, too. All I ask of the method, though, is that for 50 minutes, three times each week, it enable students with no particular attraction to literature to engage in authentic literary discussion: to invent and respond to arguments about a text, to ground those arguments in the text, and to warrant them to the satisfaction of their classmates. In other words, I only require that the method encourage and enable good literary talk. And it does.

## Notes

1. A good, relatively recent place to begin looking at scholarly attention to Toulmin is the interview by Gary Olson in *Journal of Advanced Composition* 13 (1993): 283-309. The next issue of *JAC*, Winter 1994, has articles by Arabella Lyon and Jan Swearingen. Interesting, to those who use Toulmin in composition classes, is A. Harris Fairbank’s “The Pedagogical Failure of Toulmin’s Logic” in *The Writing Instructor* 12 (1993): 103-14. A review of current composition texts found a handful of mentions of Toulmin but relatively little actual use of his model. Most extensive was a brief but useful discussion in Maxine Hairston’s *Successful Writing*, 3rd ed., pp. 75-80. Typical of introductory communications texts is David Vancil’s *Rhetoric and Argumentation*, which spends pages 120-5 on Toulmin’s method and considers the model a helpful addition to traditional logic (124).

2. Apparently the only application of Toulmin’s model to literary texts, outside the examples in Toulmin’s own brief chapter on reasoning in the arts, is a dissertation by Darnyd W. Ortiz-Seda. Though Ortiz-Seda uses Toulmin’s model, his primary concern is with developing a history of the short story; his use of the idea of warrant seems to differ significantly from Toulmin’s.

3. Certainly it is possible to introduce here a better, more sophisticated taxonomy of claims. I have stayed with this simple, even simplistic, one because I am striving to avoid any more sets of terms and categories. If the class begins to note differences in the nature of claims, that may be the time to introduce additional, more refined classifications—or to let the class develop them.



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