



Teaching Tools

From the *Instructor's Manual for [Writing Arguments: A Rhetoric with Readings](#)*, by John D. Ramage and John C. Bean.

Resources from College Online : A Classroom Strategy for Teaching Toulmin



Following is an effective pedagogical strategy for introducing Toulmin to students in a way that makes them see Toulmin's power without intimidating them.. The strategy we use is to begin with plenty of clearcut, easy examples.

The central feature of our pedagogy is to begin with the enthymeme rather than with Toulmin and to get students used to the enthymemic concepts of issue, claim, stated reason, and unstated assumption before introducing Toulmin language. Put the following enthymemes on an overhead.

Issue: What car should we buy?

- Enthymeme 1: We should buy this Geo Metro because it is extremely economical.
- Enthymeme 2: We should buy this used Volvo because it is very safe.
- Enthymeme 3: We should buy this Ford Falcon because it is red.

Our hope is that students will find something humorously fishy about Enthymeme 3 as soon as they see it, even if they can't yet quite articulate what's wrong with it. Before getting specifically to Enthymeme 3, however, the teacher should conduct a general class discussion about each of the enthymemes. We begin by getting students to articulate the unstated assumption behind each enthymeme.

Assumption for Enthymeme 1: We should buy the car that is most economical. (Economy is the major criterion we should use in selecting a car.) Assumption for Enthymeme 2: We should buy the car that is most safe. (Safety is the major criterion we should use in selecting a car.) Assumption for Enthymeme 3: We should buy a car that is red. (The color red is the major criterion we should use in selecting a car.)

We then enter a general discussion of Enthymemes 1 and 2 by talking about how we would support them or try to refute them. One possibility is that we might agree with the criterion in Enthymemes 1 and 2 but disagree with the stated reason by arguing that the Geo Metro isn't as

economical as another car or that the Volvo isn't as safe as another car. But another possibility is that we might disagree with the criterion in each case and thus argue that we should base our decision not on economy or safety but on the performance or driving fun or cargo space or reliability. The key here is to have students see the difference between supporting or attacking the stated reason itself versus supporting or attacking the unstated assumption behind the reason.

We then switch to Enthymeme 3 and ask students why they thought something was fishy about that enthymeme. We say tongue in cheek that we see nothing wrong with it. We assure them that the reason is really true—we can verify that the car is red through both the testimony of a survey of randomly chosen people (100 percent said the car was red) and through a special chemical spectroscopy test we ran on the paint. "No," they will say. "That's not what's at issue. We agree that the car's red, but we can't see what color has to do with buying the car." Then we'll reply, "Oh, you can't see how we get from the facts to the claim (echoing Toulmin's phrase that the warrant is how you get from data to claim). Or, "So you think the claim is unwarranted?" (trying to work in some Toulmin language naturally). "What we need, then, is some kind of argument to 'back up' this unstated assumption that redness is the major criterion we should choose." At this point, we begin introducing Toulmin terminology to students. The unstated assumption behind each enthymeme we now call the warrant. Together the claim, the stated reason, and the warrant constitute the frame or skeleton of the argument. These frame sentences can be stated in a single sentence each:

Claim: We should buy this used Volvo.

Stated Reason: It is very safe.

Warrant: We should buy the car that is the safest.

We explain that what fleshes out the argument--what gives it development and detail--are the grounds and/or backing. The grounds, we say, are all the facts, data, examples, evidence, or chains of reasons we use to support the stated reason. The backing is all facts, data, evidence, examples, or chains of reasons we use to support the warrant. Whether we concentrate on providing grounds, backing, or both depends on where we anticipate our audience's needs and objections.

We now go back to discuss each enthymeme again, this time using Toulmin terminology. We take the class through a series of questions like these:

1. Imagine a situation in which a writer might need to provide extensive grounds for Enthymeme 1, but no backing. What would that situation be? What kinds of grounds might you use? [Possible answer: Writer and audience have already agreed that economy is the chief criterion for choosing the car; they are disagreeing on which of two cars is the most economical. The writer supporting the Geo Metro might provide grounds in the form of data about fuel

economy, maintenance costs, taxes and licensing fees, and resale value.]

2. Imagine a situation in which a writer might need to provide backing for Enthymeme 2, but no grounds. What would that situation be? What kind of argument could be devised for backing?

[Possible answer: Writer and audience agree that Volvos are very safe, but they disagree on whether safety should be the primary criterion. The writer might argue that this car is for a very safety-minded middle class couple with young children. The husband of the couple lost a sister in an auto accident several years ago and is obsessed with safety. He could never enjoy driving or riding in a car that wasn't, in his mind, the safest car he could buy. The wife of the couple has similar concerns for safety.]

3. Now reverse the situation and imagine a scenario that requires no backing for Enthymeme 2, but plenty of grounds. [Here writer and audience have agreed that they will buy the safest car on the market, but there is disagreement over whether a used Volvo is the safest car. To argue for the Volvo's safety, the writer might provide grounds in the form of insurance claim data, crash test data, data about the actual construction of the car, and so forth.]

Finally, we move to a discussion of Enthymeme 3. We ask why something seemed fishy about that enthymeme from the start. The answer, which can now be cast in Toulmin terms, is that the Warrant seems silly. We can readily see how economy or safety could be a criterion for buying a car, but not redness. In Toulmin's term, this enthymeme cries out for backing:

Claim: We should buy this Ford Falcon.

Stated Reason: It is red.

Grounds: Direct observation; 100 percent consensus on informal survey that the car is red; statement "red" under "color" on sales form; scientific analysis of light spectrum as it is reflected from car's surface.

Warrant: If we find a car that's red, we should buy it.

Backing: ? ? ?

We then ask students either individually or in small groups to think of some kind of scenario in which one really might buy a car because it is red. In short, we ask them to think of a way to provide backing for the warrant. After students share some of their ideas, we put the following argument on the overhead [which is a true case--John Bean's neighbor in the Ford Falcon era bought a little red Falcon for his mother for exactly the reasons stated]:

You must think it ludicrous that I think we should buy the Falcon because it is red. But think for a minute about Grandma's situation. Grandpa died four months ago. Grandma has hardly left the house since then and needs to snap out of her depression. She likes to drive, even though

Grandpa usually did all the driving in that clunky old Buick they owned. She never liked that car, and she won't drive it now--maybe because it reminds her of Grandpa. What Grandma needs is a sporty, new, little, easy-to-drive-and-park car. So, of course, redness isn't the only criteria we should think about. But there are dozens of sporty little cars on the market that fit our other criteria. What is most important, I think, is that the car be red. That has always been her favorite color. It is youthful and energetic. I think a little red car will help her snap out of her mourning and get her out of the house. And let's get it for her by next Monday, her birthday. Let's have her wake up and see her own little red car in the driveway. So I say, let's go get the Falcon. It's available today, and it is just exactly the kind of red that will perk Grandma up.

These what-car-should-we-buy examples have proven effective for us in teaching students the difference between grounds and backing. Clearly, to provide grounds for Enthymeme 3 would be comically pointless. Nobody disputes the car's color in the way they might dispute the car's economy or safety. Just as clearly, it is essential to provide backing for Enthymeme 3 because no one will accept redness as a plausible criterion for buying a car the way they might accept economy or safety. The obvious difference between grounds and backing in Ethymeme 3 helps students see the distinction between grounds and backing in the other arguments also. Likewise, they see how Toulmin's system helps them make rhetorical decisions: Will my audience accept my stated reason? If not, I need substantial grounds. Will they accept my warrant? If not, I will need to make it explicit and provide backing.

[Back to Exercises from College Online](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Resources](#)

[Conversations](#)

[Subject Areas](#)

[Teaching Tools](#)

[What's New](#)

[Featured Texts](#)

Author: Daniel Anderson

Info: ab_webmaster@abacon.com

© copyright 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 Allyn & Bacon



CompSite Home



A&B Home



English Home