

Introduction to the Academic Argument Model

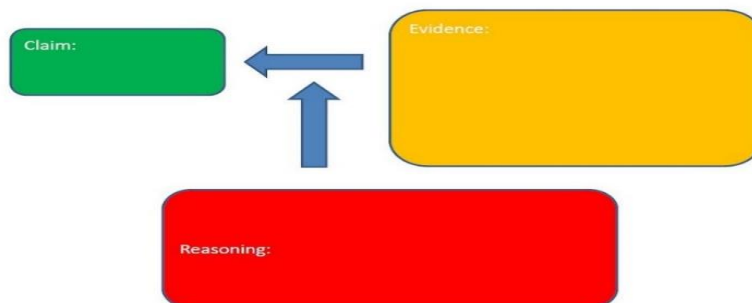
Overview

An academic argument is an evidence-based viewpoint, idea, response or answer you put forward in school (thus the word “academic,” which means “related to learning or school”). The ability to make good arguments, and to be able to respond to other arguments that contradict or differ in some way from your own, may be the single most valued and important skill in all of education, K – 12, college, and even graduate school. The other side of the coin is being able to hear, read, understand, analyze, and evaluate academic arguments. You do this all the time when you read informational articles or essays, watch a video, try to make meaning out of a story, or have a discussion in any subject area about some important question. And making arguments does start with questions, or what are called debatable issues. That isn’t surprising, since so much of what we do in class is ask, think about, and then try to respond to questions.

What we mean by a model – as in “the academic argument *model*” – is a consistent design or structure, one that is what we use to create something ourselves, something we copy. Think of a “model student” – someone who is always prepared to learn, who is inquiring and curious, who thinks critically, who tries hard – or even a “role model” – someone who has characteristics that we try to emulate, to have ourselves.

The model of an academic argument was created by a philosopher in the middle of the 20th century named Stephen Toulmin. Thinking about arguments, though, and how we communicate and discuss what we believe to be true, and even how we determine what is true, goes back to the beginning of Western civilization, to ancient Greece, and especially the famous philosopher Aristotle, who lived in the 4th century BC. Toulmin said that all arguments need to have a claim, evidence, and reasoning. The **argumentative claim** is a viewpoint, interpretation, or conclusion that is supported by the rest of the argument. **Evidence** is factual, objective substantiation for the claim. And **reasoning** is the speaker or writer’s explanation as to how the evidence proves that the claim is true. Reasoning is often left out, but don’t leave reasoning out of your arguments: all three components of an academic argument are very important!

This is how Toulmin configured the components of an academic argument in a drawing:





When you are presenting a viewpoint, interpretation, or answer in school, in response to an open or debatable question or issue, and you want to do it well, you should always put it in the form of an argument, with all three components: an argumentative claim, evidence, and reasoning. The order sometimes varies – sometimes we put the evidence first, for example – but the important thing is that all three components are there.

Now, the next step is subjecting arguments to critical thinking. In argumentation, this means seeing if there are any arguments that might oppose, disagree with, or even just differ from our argument. These opposing arguments are called **counter-arguments**. Thinking about – or reading or listening to -- counter-arguments, and then trying to respond to them is the process of **refutation**, and it is crucial to the value and importance of argumentation as a process. Ultimately, we want to **evaluate** the strength of competing or clashing arguments, in order to come up with what we believe is the truth on a given issue or question or topic. Ultimately, we have to decide what we believe is true, and that is best done through argumentation. But it all starts with the fundamental academic argument model, and making arguments using it.

Let's look at a couple of examples. We'll start with one that isn't so "academic." But arguments aren't only made in school, so it's a fair place to start.

Argumentative claim: Subway is the best fast-food restaurant.

Evidence: The Subway menu includes a large variety of fresh bread and vegetables on the menu.

Reasoning: Fresh bread and vegetables are an important part of a healthy, balanced diet. One of the most important factors in selecting a restaurant is how healthy its meals are.

The evidence above isn't "sourced" (we don't know how the speaker knows that this is true), but it is presented as factual, so it meets the criteria for evidence. Someone could dispute it if they had reason to believe that the bread or vegetables served by Subway are not fresh. That would be a counter-argument. Reasoning here explains why it is that this evidence is proof or strong support of the argumentative claim.

Here is another example, one that is more "academic."

Argumentative Claim: Global climate change is being caused by human activity.

Evidence: According to the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration, "Ninety-seven percent of climate scientists agree that climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to the burning of fossil fuels, primarily in coal plants to create electricity and in cars and other gas and oil burning vehicles."

Reasoning: Even though there can never be absolute certainty in matters of climate science, when a consensus of scientific experts exists on a question like humans' impact on climate change, we should accept it as scientifically verified.

Activity

For each of the following, please provide the missing component in the argument. If you are asked to provide evidence you should make up what you think would look like or sound like actual evidence (do not do this when you are building your own arguments!).

1.

Argumentative Claim: American middle and high schools should use a year-round calendar.

Evidence: Other developed nations that have a year-round calendar do significantly better on both math and reading in 6th – 12th grades than the United States does on the Program for International Assessment (PISA) testing done every three years, according to the 2016 report produced by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Reasoning:

2.

Argumentative Claim: The 2017 horror movie “It,” based on the Stephen King novel, does not deserve an R rating.

Evidence:

Reasoning: R ratings should be reserved for movies with inappropriate scenes – nudity, etc. Scary subject matter is OK for kids to see or read. After all, Halloween is one of our country’s favorite holidays, and it’s almost made for kids. Halloween is nothing but scary stuff. Profanity is also pretty common, and even though kids shouldn’t swear, the use of swear words in a movie does not always mean kids cannot see it.

3.

Build an argument that addresses this question: Is your school an excellent school?

Argumentative Claim:

Evidence:

Reasoning:

4.

Argumentative Claim:

Evidence: According to a study published in the spring of 2017 on its website, the non-profit Better Government Agency showed that while sweetened beverage taxes in large cities like New York and Philadelphia do reduce consumption of soda somewhat, sales of sweetened beverages have remained at about 90% of their pre-tax levels. Further, Temple University nutritionist Terry Franzelle recently wrote as part of an essay in the Philadelphia Inquirer (August 3, 2017), “Sweetened beverages are often only one part of a diet that is has too much sugar in it. Candies, cookies, sweetened snacks, other desserts, even fruit juices and many breads and starches – these all make up the vast majority of sugar intake in Americans’ diets, especially Americans who are overweight.”

Reasoning: Since sweetened beverage taxes only reduce soda consumption by 10%, they cannot really be considered successful in improving public health. People continue to drink almost all of the soda they did before the tax, they simply have the government to do so. And experts in nutrition and diet seem to suggest that even if people stop drinking soda, they consume all kinds of sugar-heavy foods in their diet. The sweetened beverage tax is too narrow to make people healthier, even if it achieved its immediate objective of getting people to drink less soda.

5.

Argumentative Claim: Today, many young people are addicted to their cell phones in the same way that people can become addicted to cigarettes or drugs.

Evidence:

Reasoning:

6.

Argumentative Claim: Hurricanes in the United States over the last fifteen years demonstrate that America is indeed living up to its basic values as a nation.

Evidence:

Reasoning: The police chief of Houston, the city centrally impacted by Harvey, is in a good position to see the "mythic toughness" and self-reliance of the individuals in his community. When he says that his department witnessed and supported more than 1,000 separate incidents of people taking their initiative to save themselves, their family or their property, this is a significant observation. And self-reliance is a value that is fundamental to America throughout its history, from the Revolution of 1776, when colonists wanted to exist separate from powerful Great Britain, through Westward Expansion, even the Civil War and tough periods of the 20th century.