3.6: Toulmin Approach to Argument

In order to determine the most effective strategy to respond to a case, the con-side of an argument needs to analyze the argument to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the pro-side. The Toulmin Model gives us an effective tool to successfully clash with the pro-side.

Stephen Toulmin was one of the modern-day leaders of rhetorical theory. He looked at the classical structure of arguments, and found a problem. The conclusions of the classical approaches to arguing needed to be absolute. That is, the conclusions of a correctly structured argument were either absolutely, 100% valid (true) or absolutely 0% invalid (untrue). There were no grey areas.

In his work on logic and argument, *The Uses of Argument (Toulmin, 2008)*, Toulmin defines six parts that make up an argument:

- Claim
- Grounds
- Warrant
- Backing
- Reservations (rebuttals)
- Qualifier

In this approach he breaks down an argument into its component parts to demonstrate the degree of confidence you should have in the argument. Analyzing the argument allows the con-side to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the argument, so a counter argument can be effectively delivered.

Here is a simple argument that is diagrammed using the Toulmin approach.
3.6.1: "Sample Toulmin Model" (CC BY 4.0; J. Marteney)

- **Claim**: This is the main point or thesis of the argument. This is what the pro-side is attempting to convince you of or trying to prove. If the claim is not directly stated, just ask, “What is the pro-side trying to prove?” In the sample argument, the conclusion, the claim you are attempting to prove is that "Phil’s friends will lead successful lives."

- **Grounds**: Here is the starting point of your argument that leads to your Claim. This is what you have observed, read or what you believe to exist. In this sample argument, the grounds are that "Phil has several friends who have graduated from college."

- **Warrants**: This is the overall logical underpinning of the argument. A general rule that can apply to more than one Grounds. The Warrant can be a universal law of nature, legal principle or statute, rule of thumb, mathematical formula, or just a logical idea that appeals to the person making the argument. Warrants usually begin with words like; all, every, any, anytime, whenever, or are if-then, either-or, statements. The Warrant is a general rule that has no exceptions. Those come later
  - Warrants are important because they provide the underlying reasons linking the claim and the grounds. You can infer the warrants by asking, "What’s causing the advocate to say the things he/she does?" or "Where’s the advocate coming from?" In our example argument, the warrant is that “All people who graduate from college are successful.” No exceptions.

- **Backing**: Backing is the specific data, which is used to justify and support the grounds and warrant. In Toulmin’s original work, he only includes Backing for the Warrant. I am adding Backing to also look at the quality of the original Grounds of the argument. Critical thinkers realize that there must be backing for their statements or they are merely assertions. When clashing with an argument, we need to look at the quality of evidence that supports the initial grounds.
  - In our diagrammed argument, the Backing for the Grounds are the names of the specific friends who graduated from college. The Backing for the warrant comes from an LA Times article that college graduates earn $1,000,000 more in their working lifetime than non-college graduates do. I like to separate the Backing from the Grounds and Backing for the Warrant as they are two different areas that can affect the strength of the argument. Toulmin makes no such distinction.

- **Reservations and Rebuttals**: They are the “unlesses” to the Warrant. Reservations do not change the wording of the warrant. Reservations do not change the “universality” of the Warrant. But Reservations are exceptions to the warrant. These exceptions weaken the validity of the conclusion because the Grounds may just be one of these exceptions, thus meaning that the Claim is invalid. In our example, your uncle has a Reservation to the Warrant. He states that people who get a college degree will succeed, unless they are lazy. The “unless they are lazy” is the Reservation to the Warrant.
• Note that a Reservation does not refer to a rejection of the Warrant. In this example "Unless they did not graduate" would not be a Reservation because it implies that the Warrant did not happen. Instead a Reservation is a statement that suggests that even though the Warrant took place, the Claim may not occur.

• **Qualifiers:** Suggest the degree of validity of the argument. If there is no Qualifier, then the argument is 100% valid. But if a Qualifier exists then the conclusion is less than absolute. With a qualifier, the argument is about probability and possibility, not about certainty. You cannot use superlatives like all, every, absolutely or never, none, and no one. Instead you need to qualify (tone down) your claim with expressions like; most likely, many, probably, some or rarely, few, possibly, etc.

• In our sample argument, it is argued that Phil's friends will “most likely” be successful. The “most likely” is the Qualifier.