5 | Argumentation

So far, you've been introduced to arguments in the context of logic as well as Aristotle's modes of persuasion. But in this chapter, I'd like to talk about argumentation in more depth, given that most of the critical thinking techniques you are learning in this book tend to be applied to the construction or deconstruction of arguments that take place between human beings (including friends, workmates, or presidential candidates) using everyday language.

Whenever the subject of argumentation is discussed, invariably someone brings up the classic Monty Python "I'd Like to Have an Argument" sketch.

If you haven't seen it before, the sketch involves a hapless Michael Palin walking into a clinic where he can pay to have an argument (a pound for a five-minute argument, or eight pounds for a course of ten). But he gets increasingly frustrated when the person he paid to argue with him instead simply contradicts everything he says (as in "Yes you did!" "No I didn't!" "You most certainly did!" "No I did not!").

At one point, this maddening non-argument comes around to debating what an argument is, with Palin insisting that "an argument is a connected series of statements intended to establish a proposition! It's not just saying 'no it isn't'" (to which his interlocutor simply insists "yes it is.").

Now Python's definition of an argument is a good place to start, as is their comical illustration of what an argument doesn't look like. But we need to go further in order to understand the difference between a genuine argument and something that might look like an argument but isn't. It's what the author Jay Heinrichs, in his hugely enjoyable book *Thank You for Arguing*, classifies as a *fight*.

Quoting from Heinrichs' book:

"The basic difference between an argument and a fight: an argument, done skillfully, gets people to want to do what you want. You fight to win; you argue to achieve agreement."

What Heinrichs is getting at is something that those who have studied rhetoric and persuasion have understood for centuries, that an argument is a cooperative enterprise.

This can be confusing because we tend to use the word "argument" to describe any type of loud disagreement, including emotionally uncomfortable ones such as our parents yelling at each other over money or household responsibilities or that couple loudly breaking up in a restaurant.

But those disconcerting disagreements are not necessarily arguments (although some of them might be).

The reason I say that an argument, as we're defining it for the purpose of studying critical thinking, is a *cooperative* activity is that both parties to a genuine argument ultimately want to achieve the same goal, even if they offer different or diametrically opposing ways of getting there.

For instance, two parties to an argument may be offering radically different answers to a question but they are in partnership with regard to trying to get the same question answered.

Another set of arguers may be hotly debating whether the needy are best served by providing them assistance vs. giving them the resources to help themselves. But again, both of them are working towards the same goal (in this case, helping the poor).

Identifying what is vs. what isn't an argument is further complicated by the fact that what we usually call an argument (two people disagreeing at either a low or high decibel range) is just one type of argument, one in which each party is trying to convince the other of something.

But you can have other arguments that don't require two people to agree or disagree, or even two people.

For example, as you read this book you are being introduced to a series of arguments presented by one person (me) designed to convince a wide and unseen audience (you) of something (for example, that you can learn about critical thinking by studying presidential elections).

You get this same type of one-to-many argument whenever a speaker is presenting to an audience: when a vendor is presenting a proposal to a group at work, for example, or when a coach is trying to motivate a sports team. In these cases, a sole speaker is trying to persuade an audience, which means he is making an argument without requiring a specific opponent.

And even in cases where there is an opponent, as in a courtroom where the defense and prosecution are in direct opposition, these two lawyers are not trying to convince each other of anything. In fact, the prosecutor couldn't care less what the defense council believes (or vice versa) since the audience they are trying to convince is the judge or jury.

If you think about it, most of the arguments we are exposed to (certainly during a political campaign) are similar to that one I just described involving a courtroom. The Democratic presidential candidate, for example, doesn't make speeches or take out campaign ads in order change the mind of his or her Republican rival. Rather, the goal is to persuade an often unseen audience (the voters) that they is right and their Republican opponent is wrong.

Similarly, when the two presidential candidates square off in debates, the Republican candidate will not be making a series of arguments in hope that, at the end of them, the opposing Democrat will stand up and say “Good gosh you’ve convinced me! You were right all along!” Rather, both candidates are making their own one-to-many arguments with the voting public as the audience that needs convincing.

This is why campaigns can sometimes seem so maddeningly artificial, with the candidates refusing to really engage with each other even when they share the same stage. But it makes perfect sense if you realize that an actual give-and-take exchange between candidates (especially in our media-driven campaign age) only takes place by happy accident or if one candidate feels he can score points with the audience by *appearing* to directly engage with an opponent or opponents, possibly to look tough or to pounce on some gaffe that has left that opponent vulnerable.

So now that we have described the many forms an argument might take (one-on-one, one-to-many, etc.), how do we distinguish between a genuine argument and a fight?

One obvious way is to look at whether nonverbal means of persuasion are used. For example, someone beating another person with a hockey stick in order to get them to do what they’re told is not trying to convince but is rather engaging in coercion through violence. And such coercion can never be part of any legitimate argument.

But there are subtler things people do or say when they are engaged in something that might look like an argument but is actually a fight. Shouting insults that contribute nothing to resolving the issue being debated or just raising the emotional temperature so high that debate cannot continue are behaviors you’ll find in unproductive fights vs. productive arguments.

You see this on talk shows when a host bursts into fits of rage whenever his guest is getting the better of him. You also see it when someone starts to tear up during a heated conversation, indicating that the emotional cost of continuing the current line of discussion is becoming too high. There may be completely legitimate reasons leading to such outrage or tears, but they are also examples of how heated emotions can stop an argument in its tracks.

In fact, anything designed to shut down discussion by making reasoned discourse impossible (such as intentionally ignoring valid, vital questions or concerns presented by an opponent or using highly emotional words or images in order to overwhelm reason) are usually signs that something other than an argument is taking place.

For example, in a debate over a military conflict, bringing up the human cost of war (in terms of numbers of people on both sides killed or wounded in battle and even making use of some of their stories to personalize the damage war can cause) is completely legitimate. But filling the room with grisly images of broken bodies and refusing to discuss any political or historic factors that might justify a war in favor of just trying to provoke an emotional response through pictures of violence and gore is an emotional or pathos-driven tactic designed to prevent a legitimate argument from occurring.

Our earlier definition of an argument as ultimately being a cooperative enterprise can provide a guide to distinguish arguments from non-arguments. For if you have two parties that don’t share a goal, who just want to dominate or humiliate the other, then we have left the realm of argumentation and are instead discussing aggressive or pointless activities that have nothing to do with the subjects we’re discussing (except, perhaps, as an example of what not to do).

But now that you are able to distinguish an argument from a non-argument, you need to keep in mind that many, if not most arguments, can still get stuck somewhere. Plato’s Socratic dialogues, for example, are some of the greatest examples of thoughtful and insightful argumentation ever written, but most of these end at an impasse. But that’s OK since for Plato, it is the journey, the quest for truth, that is the goal, not the ultimate discovery of answers, especially to unanswerable questions such as "what is truth, justice, or beauty?".

Even in less rarified situations, arguments often reach a standstill. Sometimes this just has to do with the skill level of the arguer. If someone is totally uninformed about an issue or ignorant of what is required to hold up their end of an argument but insists on arguing anyway, then you are dealing with someone with whom a constructive argument can probably never take place.

Even between the extremes of Socrates and our hypothetical ignoramus there are several legitimate reasons why an argument might end up at a stopping point. For example, there may not be a right or wrong answer to the question being debated, but debate must end at some point and a decision be made.

Can we know with absolute certainty whether a program proposed by either presidential candidate will be a boon to civilization or a destructive waste of money? Probably not, but at some point the argumentation must stop and an option chosen, which is why votes are such an important way of settling arguments one way or another.

So now that we know what an argument is and are ready to be humble about what arguments can and cannot ultimately achieve, it's time to discuss how to argue effectively or determine if an argument being directed towards you is any good.

We touched on some ways to construct strong arguments in previous chapters, specifically by building your argument on a sound logical foundation and making sure you strike the right balance between logic (logos), emotion (pathos), and building a connection to the needs and values of your audience (ethos). But before you can start building these and other components into your argument, you first need to understand what kind of argument you are making.

Jay Heinrichs, in *Thank You for Arguing*, points out that there are three classes of arguments: forensic arguments that try to determine what happened in the past, demonstrative arguments that deal with the present, and deliberative arguments that talk about what we should do in the future.

That courtroom example I used earlier is one where forensic arguments are likely to take place. In fact, you probably know this term from watching police procedural shows in which forensic scientists try to determine key events that took place in the past, such as the exact hour a man was struck on the head by a cuckoo clock. In the courtroom (real or fictional) the opponents (the defense attorney and prosecutor) are also engaging in forensics, in this case forensic argumentation to establish “who done it” in the past.

Demonstrative arguments, which are about the here and now, are probably the ones you hear the least these days. Funeral speeches, which were a high art in the ancient world, are examples of demonstrative arguments where praise is heaped on the recently deceased along with flowery recitations of long lists of accomplishments. Heinrichs also lists commencement addresses and sermons as examples of demonstrative arguments, which are mostly used to bind a community together in support of their common ideals, although they can also be used to draw distinction between or even generate hatred of a common enemy.

But politics is almost always about decisions that will affect the future, which is why most political arguments are, or at least should be, deliberative.

If you keep in mind these three types of arguments, and the verb tenses associated with each one (past, present, and future), you have another handy tool to determine if someone is arguing well.

For unless you are trying to solve a crime or celebrate the recently graduated or deceased, most constructive arguments tend to be deliberative.

Don’t believe me? Well, the last time you had a spat with a loved one that included phrases like “you never…!” or “you always…!” how did that go?

Probably not well, and from our critical-thinking vantage point we can see why: because they took place in the wrong tense, in a present tense that is largely about assigning blame rather than finding constructive solutions.

Most likely, that "you never…" or "you always" sentiment (such as "how many times am I supposed to clean up the mud you keep tracking into the house?") can be recast into a more constructive, future-tense, deliberative form such as "From now on, could you do your best to wipe your feet before you come inside?" In the first case, blame is being assigned. In the second, a constructive solution is being proposed.

Politicians generally come off badly when they rely too much on the past and present vs. the future tense. Too much forensic argumentation makes a candidate seem petty or primarily interested in finger-pointing vs. problem solving. And too much demonstrative, present-tense argumentation can make a candidate seem tribal or pandering.

In contrast, if debate primarily takes place in the future tense, then we're talking about options that have the possibility of improving things by urging us to make decisions that can lead to better outcomes. For if there is little to be gained by assigning blame or bemoaning our present predicaments, the future is where our choices can make a difference.

So let's look at a little campaign rhetoric and see which category of argumentation it falls into.

When President Obama announced the launch of his re-election campaign in 2012, he told Ohio supporters this: "Now we face a choice. For the last few years, the Republicans who run this Congress have insisted that we go right back to the policies that created this mess." That's talking about the past, so he is making a forensic argument.

Later he said, "I still believe that we are not as divided as our politics suggest. I still believe that we have more in common than the pundits tell us; that we're not Democrats or Republicans, but

Americans first and foremost." Present tense, that is, a demonstrative argument.

Finally, he concluded, "I have kept that promise, Ohio. And I will keep it so long as I have the honor of being your president. So if you're willing to stick with me, if you're willing to fight with me, and press on with me; if you're willing to work even harder in this election than you did in the last election, I guarantee you we will move this country forward." Future tense and so a deliberative argument.

I'll leave it to you to do perform this same exercise with speeches given by candidates from both parties during the next election cycle or by anyone talking on any topic, which must by necessity include verbs conjugated in past, present, or future tenses.

But before moving on, I don't want you to walk away with the assumption that 100 percent of our political discussions should be deliberative in nature. Sometimes there is blame to be assigned. Sometimes there are people here and now that deserve to be celebrated or condemned. But too much time dwelling on the past or the present can derail an argument that's meant to help you position yourself as an agent for improving things, something that can only be accomplished in the future.

Having covered what goes into a good argument (including balancing logic and emotion, connecting with the audience, and speaking in the appropriate tense), let's take a brief detour to look at some of the things that can make an argument weaker or even break it: logical or other types of flaws called fallacies.

Fallacies are a bit of a tricky subject, not because they're hard to learn but because there are so many of them, and they are just so much fun to learn, especially since many of them have cool names and can be illustrated with wacky examples. Which is why I'll be introducing the topic of fallacies in this chapter with some examples of the more common fallacies you are likely to encounter during an election year, then covering less-common (but no-less fun) fallacies in the next couple of chapters.

Before I get into specific fallacies, keep in mind that fallacies can be grouped into two classes: formal and informal. Formal fallacies are just breaks in that formal logic codified by Aristotle that we talked about in the last chapter. For example, if "all dogs are animals and Francine is a dog, therefore Francine is an animal" is a correct (i.e., valid) logical sequence (or syllogism), then someone claiming "all dogs are animals, Francine is a dog, therefore all dogs are Francine" has committed a formal fallacy leading to an invalid argument.

But most fallacies we generally encounter in life are informal ones. If you recall, formal logic is only concerned with the structure of an argument and couldn't care less if we're talking about dogs and cats, mermaids and leprechauns, or A's and B's. As long as the statements are worded and arranged properly, the rules of formal logic apply.

But with informal fallacies, the real-world content of your statements actually matters. You saw this in the last chapter when you were introduced to arguments that, regardless of their validity, were *unsound* due to problems with their premises. Which is why most arguers who commit informal fallacies tend to create arguments that fall down due to lack of soundness.

For example, if I were to say that Bill is a bigot and Bill is also a member of the Tea Party movement, or that Ted is a criminal and Ted was involved with Occupy Wall Street, the statements "therefore the Tea Party movement is bigoted" or "Occupy Wall Street was run by criminals" would each represent an informal fallacy called the *fallacy of composition*.

This is the fallacy where we inappropriately attribute a characteristic possessed by a part to the whole. The classic example of this is "the universe is made of atoms, atoms are very tiny, therefore the universe is very tiny," which is clearly fallacious (that's the fancy way of saying something's wrong because it's the result of a fallacy).

A similar fallacy is called the *association fallacy*, part of a group of fallacies called "red herrings" that are designed to distract the audience from what they should be thinking about. In politics, association fallacies (commonly referred to as "guilt by association") would be something along the lines of "I couldn't care less that my opponent's wife's doctor is the son of Hitler's barber."

Normally, associations are bit less tenuous than this, and today they tend to hover around things like campaign contributions from questionable donors, such as "when did you become aware that your campaign received a $500 donation from the National Association of Cat Smotherers?" followed by calls for the opposing candidate to both return the money and publically denounce the contributor and everything that donor stands for. Our Internet age has also enabled the automation of guilt by association, which frequently involves condemning opponents for having a link on their Web site which points to a different Web site containing controversial content or the behavior of ill-tempered Twitter followers.

Such accusations usually provide a win-win for the accuser since the target can either refuse to do what's asked of him and be tainted by his donor's or follower's unpopular beliefs, or do what they're told and look weak. This may explain why the association fallacy has become widely popular with the media, which have lately taken to asking every candidate in a primary race to distance himself or herself from deranged statements made by fans of their party rivals.

Another one of my favorite fallacies is the *fallacy of moderation*.

In general, most societies value moderate vs. extreme behavior, and political rewards generally go to the candidate who can demonstrate that he or she is good at finding the middle ground between extremes.

The problem is who gets to define the extremes?

To give you a quantitative example, let's say a candidate wants to justify raising the highest income tax bracket to 45 percent by claiming that in calling for this new rate he is saying no to both extremists in his own party who want the tax rate raised to 90 percent and extremists in the opposing party who want to eliminate the income tax entirely.

The problem with this argument, and what makes it a fallacy, is that these two extremes are not realistic. Even if we accept that some partisans exist who want to raise taxes to exorbitant levels or get rid of them completely, both of these opinions are marginal at best, meaning they are very unlikely to ever be officially debated, much less enacted. In which case, centering yourself between them is an attempt to make a proposal look more moderate than it really is. This doesn't mean good arguments cannot be found to justify a tax rate of 45 percent. It just means that claiming it to be a moderate option is not one of them.

Then you've got the *post-hoc fallacy* (actually its full name is *post hoc ergo propter hoc*—see what I mean about cool names?) which translates to "before, therefore caused by". This is the fallacy that says since I sent a letter to the president complaining about high insurance premiums before he came out in favor of major health-care reform, then it was my letter that caused him to propose the new law.

This is the old "rooster who thinks his crowing caused the sun to come up" argument, and it's used more often than you might think, especially in our political culture where we tend to blame everything that happens during a president's term, from financial problems to revolutions and natural disasters, on the president himself (especially if we don't like him or his party) regardless of whether or not he had any control over the matter.

Before we move on, I'd like to add my own fallacy to this list, which I call the *fallacy fallacy*. This one says that because certain fallacies, such as guilt-by-association or the post-hoc fallacy, exist, then any attempt to do something like point out a candidate's problematical association or insist he or she take responsibility for something that happened during his or her term is by definition fallacious or otherwise inappropriate.

The problem with this argument is that a candidate's closet may indeed hide skeletons. Or a president's policies may actually be responsible for financial or diplomatic disasters that occurred under his watch and it's our job as critical thinkers to sort out fallacious from genuine accusations.

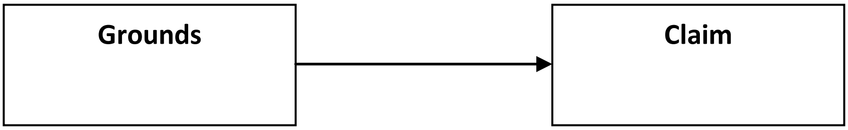
By now, you may be asking a couple of very legitimate questions, like "How are we supposed sort out all this stuff out? We've got logos, pathos, ethos, and verb tense to deal with. And now we've got fallacies to add to the pile. How can we keep track of so much for even the simplest arguments (much less long complicated ones or ones that may consist of many smaller arguments linked together)?" Fortunately, there are tools, including intuitive graphical ones, that can help us with this task.

In the last chapter, you were introduced to Venn diagrams, which are an extremely useful way of visually representing arguments that can be translated into a standard format where their premises and conclusions can be worded and organized so that an argument can be checked for validity and soundness.

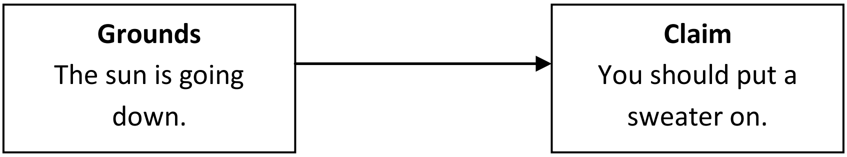
But very often arguments contain lines of reasoning that are difficult to boil down to an unambiguous set of statements or worked into a formal, syllogism-like structure. And the real-world language most of us use, especially in debate, does not always lend itself to Aristotelian structured formal organization and analysis.

Fortunately, there are other methods for mapping arguments that work more broadly, my favorite being the system developed by Stephen Toulmin called "Toulmin diagrams" or "argument maps."

Rather than premises leading to a conclusion, Toulmin diagrams begin with “Grounds” leading to a “Claim,” which can be diagrammed as follows:



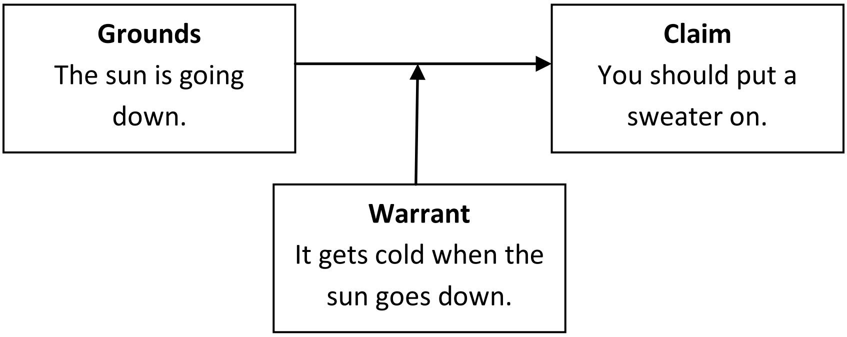
The arrow linking the “Grounds” box to the “Claims” box is meant to illustrate the fact that the grounds lead to (or must somehow justify) the claim. To illustrate this, let’s begin with a very simple argument: “The sun is going down, so you should put a sweater on.” This would be mapped as follows:



So in this particular argument, someone is making the claim that you should put a sweater on based on the fact (i.e., the grounds) that the sun is going down.

And how do they justify the link between the grounds and claim?

To illustrate this link, let’s draw a new box below the arrow connecting the first two boxes and call that one the “Warrant.” And let’s draw an arrow from this new box straight up until its point is touching the arrow between the “Grounds” and “Claim” boxes. In this new “Warrant” box, we will put these words: “It gets cold when the sun goes down.”

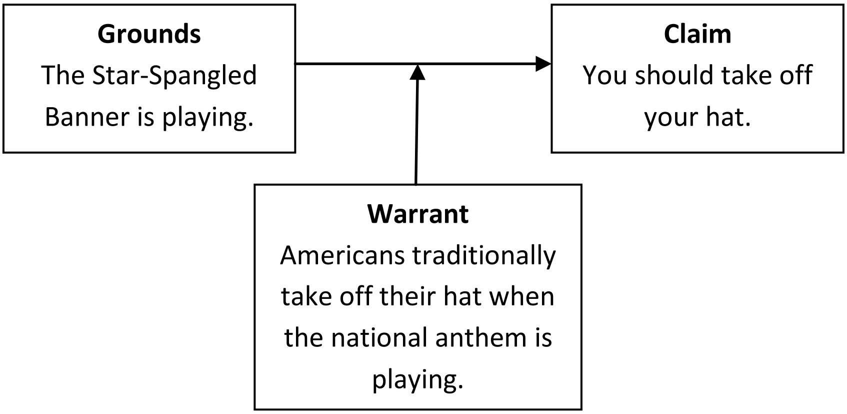

Grounds
The sun is going down.
Claim
You should put a sweater on.
Warrant
It gets cold when the sun goes down.

So now we can see our full argument in which the warrant is used to justify the link between the grounds and the claim. Pretty simple huh?

"What's the big deal?" I hear the more syllogism-minded among you cry out. "Aren't the grounds the premise of a logical argument and the claim the conclusion (with the warrant representing that missing premise, or *enthymeme*, mentioned in the last chapter, which connects the two)?"

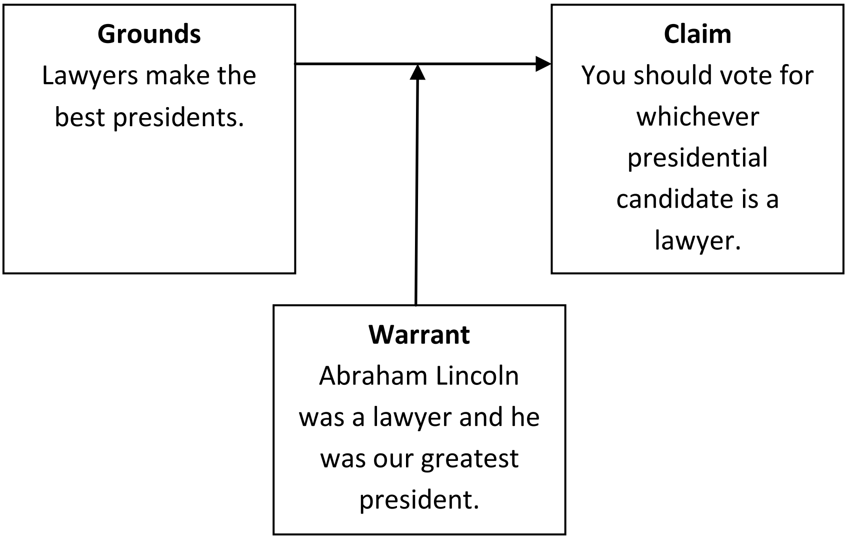
Ah, but here is the beauty of the Toulmin model. For in it, things like grounds and warrants do not necessarily have to be logical statements or statements of fact. They can be appeals to tradition or emotion or any of the things we have been talking about in our discussion of argumentation.

For example, let's create another simple Toulmin diagram in which the claim says you should take off your hat and the grounds are that the "Star-Spangled Banner" is playing. In this case, the warrant would be that Americans traditionally take their hats off when the national anthem is played, making the warrant an appeal to ethos rather than a logical connection.


Grounds
The Star-Spangled Banner is playing.
Claim
You should take off your hat.
Warrant
Americans traditionally take off their hat when the national anthem is playing.

One of the most useful things Toulmin maps do is give us a structured way to analyze arguments for strengths and weaknesses so we can attack or defend them in the right places.

Let’s create one more Toulmin map, one containing a political argument, to demonstrate what I mean. This one is designed to prove that in a presidential race you should always vote for whichever candidate is a lawyer.

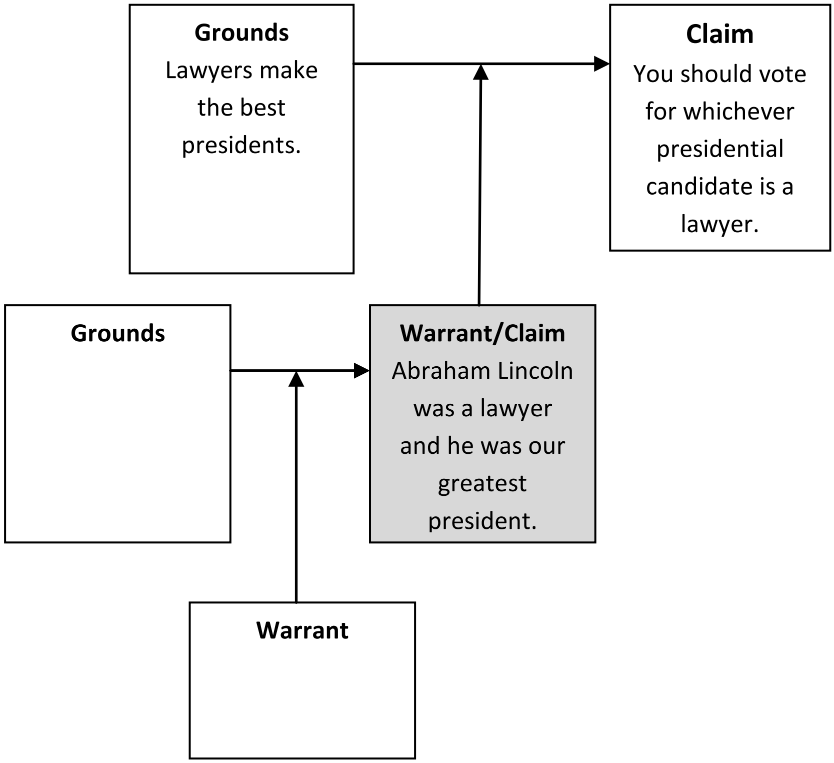

Grounds
Lawyers make the best presidents.
Claim
You should vote for whichever presidential candidate is a lawyer.
Warrant
Abraham Lincoln was a lawyer and he was our greatest president.

Instinctively, you probably know that this argument is weak. But let’s use our Toulmin map to determine exactly where its weaknesses lie and how they can be attacked.

For instance, I can attack the grounds by challenging the notion that lawyers make the best presidents, pointing out (with examples) that some of our worst presidents have also been lawyers while some of our best presidents have not been lawyers.

I could attack the warrant (the one about Abraham Lincoln) for similar reasons, although I could also point out that this warrant is a composition fallacy that takes the good qualities of a single individual (Lincoln, the good lawyer president) and applies them inappropriately to a much larger group (all lawyer presidents, and any lawyer that ever wants to be president).

Things start to become interesting after we have attacked things like a warrant and the originator of the argument wants to challenge our attack by defending it. For when we do this, the attacked warrant suddenly has to do double duty. It remains the warrant for the original argument, but it also becomes the claim for a new argument in which the statement “Abraham Lincoln was a lawyer and he was our greatest president” must be supported by its own grounds and warrant as shown on the following page.


Grounds
Lawyers make the best presidents.
Claim
You should vote for whichever presidential candidate is a lawyer.
Grounds
Warrant/Claim
Abraham Lincoln was a lawyer and he was our greatest president.
Warrant

As you can imagine, these diagrams can do a lot of branching once you start dealing with multi-part arguments, with many branches open to challenge. But Toulmin's system provides a way to organize an argument (and thus your thinking) in a way that does not require every statement be translated into language that would be familiar to Aristotle.

In the "Case Studies" section of this book, I apply Toulmin's method to a piece of campaign rhetoric to show how it can be used to ensure you're thinking about the right things (such as accuracy and reasonableness) when confronted with a persuasive argument like a negative campaign ad designed to get you to think about something else.

With this quest for truth always on our minds, I'd like to make a final appeal regarding why the subject of argumentation is of such vital importance.

Like a number of things you've been reading about so far, many of the concepts related to argumentation originated with the Greeks, particularly those of ancient Athens, to help them manage something new they invented called a "democracy."

Unlike what we today call democracy, the ancient Athenians did not have senators or representatives who each made decisions on behalf of a group of voters. Rather, every voter (which, at the time, meant every free male citizen over a certain age) got to decide every issue, including issues of war or peace. All were subject to a majority vote. If you want to grasp what this was like, imagine every national political decision being made in the United States being put to a nationwide referendum.

In such an environment, the ability to argue and persuade voters was not only important, it was the ticket to power and influence, which is why so many people trained in rhetoric and why many of the subjects you've been reading about were first codified and studied by these early democrats.

Today in the United States, we live in a representative republic, much more similar to Rome before it became an empire than to the full-blown participatory democracy of Athens.

America's founding fathers were not just well-read in the history of these ancient societies. They consciously modeled the United States on them, although they made some important adjustments in order to avoid the problems that both Greece and Rome ran into.

First off, they separated powers to try to avoid rule by the mob that led Athens to disaster and the factions and strong men that doomed the republic of Rome. But at the heart of our founders' project was an attempt to leverage the power of rhetoric, argumentation, and oratory to ensure important issues were settled by thoughtful people arguing them out rather than by the fist or sword.

Some people would say that the problems we struggle with today arise from the fact that we argue too much rather than try to find ways to “reach across the aisle” (which is just a fancy way of saying “cooperate”).

But I would say that the problem isn’t that we argue too much, but that we don’t argue enough. Instead, we fight, we sue each other, we drag our political opponents before prosecutorial courtrooms and congressional committees trying to get policies we disagree with declared illegal. In fact, we do everything *but* participate in the type of constructive argumentation you have been reading about in this chapter.

Because not enough people are teaching argumentation and the persuasive arts, not enough people are learning and practicing them. This is why we confuse the constructive and, yes, cooperative enterprise of robust and honest argumentation with the shallow, noisy free-for-all that passes for current debate.

So before you decide to isolate yourself into enclaves where you can safely ignore what “the other side” has to say or raise your voice when someone starts stating opinions you rarely hear and would rather not respond to, why not try arguing for a change? It may not have kept Rome alive forever, but then again (if you count both the Western/Rome-based and Eastern/Byzantium-based empires as “Roman”) they did manage a pretty good go of it for two thousand years.