

“Telephone” Toulmin Framework for an Argument Essay

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Timeframe: 45-60 minutes

Target Audience: Mid-semester composition/critical thinking students who have read a significant amount of material in common (including material on the writing of enthymemes and the Toulmin method) and are ready to write an argumentation essay

Materials needed (including preparation): Students will need paper, pens, and a writing prompt that is both sufficiently complex to generate interesting ideas but not so detailed that comprehension itself becomes an issue. This exercise could also be modified for students writing on computers or in an online forum such as CANVAS. The writing prompt/topic for the enthymemes needs to be based on something the students have knowledge of in common (for example, based on a previously assigned reading). They will also have already read about enthymemes and the Toulmin system in their textbook. (I use chapter four of *Writing Arguments*, by Ramage, Bean and Johnson.) The instructor will need a computer, a projector, the PowerPoint slides, and a timer preferably with an audible alarm.

Objectives: After the lesson, students will be able to

- articulate how a sound thesis can set up reader expectations and suggest the structure of an argument.
- generate ideas more easily in a timed-writing or impromptu writing situation.
- pinpoint how theses might be strengthened to ensure that one's point gets across clearly.
- demonstrate their understanding of the Toulmin system of framing an argument.
- understand the link between being able to analyze an argument rhetorically and being able to construct one's own argument using those same skills.

Introduction to Lesson [3 minutes]:

Ask how many have played the game of telephone before and have them describe the way it works with messages going through a chain of people to see if the message is lost in the transfer. (Describe it yourself if the students are unfamiliar.) Like “telephone,” students in this activity will work together as a chain to complete a message, or in this case, develop an argument to go along with an enthymeme-style thesis using the Toulmin method. Each student will create a thesis and pass it to the student on his or her right. At the end, we will have as many arguments developed as there are students, and each will be the result of multiple students' input. Each student will get to practice every step in the development of a Toulmin-style argument.

Procedures [40-45 minutes]:

Step 1: Set up—Scaffolding, Sequencing, Modeling [6 minutes]

Using a graphic (in the PowerPoint presentation), I take the students through the various steps they will follow themselves. I must emphasize that while all students will attempt all steps, each

document is passed on to a different student for the following step so that when complete, each step following the initial enthymeme is done by a separate classmate. We will briefly note and define each of the following steps:

- 1) write an enthymeme in response to the prompt;
- 2) write the “warrant” or underlying assumption that the enthymeme assumes in its audience;
- 3) make bullet points of the “backing” for the “warrant”—the evidence that supports the underlying assumptions of the argument;
- 4) make bullet points of the “grounds” —the evidence supporting the “because” clause of the original enthymeme.

When we are done, we can review them as a class and decide on what the strongest arguments are, thus reviewing the use of evidence and the constructions of the enthymeme-style theses. The set-up will close by emphasizing how this exercise is meant to be fun and quick, encouraging us all to think quickly on our feet and generate ideas for argument development (as if we had a timed writing to do). Note that all my examples come from the textbook I use, *Writing Arguments*, by Ramage, Bean and Johnson, so that students are reinforcing their previously acquired knowledge, not being presented with new information about the structure of enthymemes, what is meant by a warrant, etc. at this point.

[PowerPoint slides 1-7]

Step 2: Enthymeme-Style Theses [2-5 minutes]

The students will read a prompt which draws on their previous reading and will write down a thesis constructed in the form of an enthymeme (as if they were about to answer the prompt with a complete essay). It needs to have a statement and a “because” clause. Instructors may request that students prepare for this activity by bringing in an enthymeme-style version of a thesis they plan to use for their next paper (and cut the time accordingly). **[PowerPoint slide 8]**

Step 3: Grounds [6 minutes]

Having passed their documents to the right again, students will imagine/write down at least three supporting points that would support the “because clause” of the enthymeme.

[PowerPoint slide 9]

Step 4: The Warrant [4 minutes]

The students will then pass their enthymemes to the students to their right who will then write down what the underlying assumption of the proposed argument is, what Toulmin calls the warrant. Students will not be allowed to talk to each other during this exercise. Their intention must be clarified by what is on the page alone. They will then fold the page down so that only the warrant and not the original enthymeme shows for the people doing step four. **[PowerPoint slide 10]**

Step 5: The Backing [6 minutes]

The students will pass their collective documents again to the right, and then they will imagine/write down at least three supporting points that would support the warrant. **[PowerPoint slide 11]**

Step 6: Evaluating the Arguments and Supplying Rebuttals [8-15 minutes]

The next student in the chain will evaluate what ended up being stronger, the backing or the grounds. They will consider what worked and what did not. We will discuss as a group how we might strengthen these enthymemes further. [PowerPoint slide 12]

Closure/Evaluation [10 minutes]:

Students will get their original enthymemes back. Allow them a few minutes to review what their classmates have written. Students will then share what happened to their ideas in the process (how happy, surprised, etc. they may have been with them, what was most difficult, what happened that was unexpected, etc.). Instructors can extend or shorten this part depending on how many different kinds of responses the student provide. This reflection time is generally the most productive part of the activity. [PowerPoint slide 13]

Lesson Analysis:

Students generally respond well to these “telephone” exercises. Failures in clarity or intent often provide levity in the classroom rather than frustration, and working together encourages students to practice a variety of skills, often pushing them beyond their comfort zones or “ruts.” Many times the collective approach produces much stronger work than each individual’s component. If we have problems along the chain of contributors to the project, as in the original game of miscommunication, we learn about what parts of the writing need additional work. If we succeed, students get to see how their own contribution helped lead to an effective outcome. Since I began including more critical thinking and logic into my composition class last year, using theorists such as Toulmin, I developed an exercise that helps me to strengthen their understanding of Toulmin while they practice their skills of producing theses and outlining the support they will need for their arguments. Because students are both developing their own original enthymemes and coming up with ideas for and about other people’s arguments, they are actively combining practice in rhetorically analyzing the arguments of others and creating their own—two skills that reinforce each other for a lifetime of learning.

Both the strength and weakness of this project resides in the same point: it covers a variety of writing skills. This can be positive in giving students practice in a variety of key writing topics (i.e., editing, evaluating evidence, generating a thesis and support, etc.). However, this aspect can also be a weakness as it can be a rather complicated project. If students do not engage with enthusiasm in this fast-paced process, it could get bogged down in the shuffling of papers. The facilitator will need to ensure that each task is completed and handed off to the appropriate person for each succeeding step. Having the students sit in a circle is ideal for this activity. Whenever possible, the instructor needs to keep this a lively and upbeat project so that the speed buoys students’ spirits rather than makes them feel rushed or confused. Either a prompt focused on popular culture or one close to their own interests (such as an upcoming longer project) should work the best for maintaining student interest and energy levels. My own students enjoyed the kinetic nature of the whole process. They asked to repeat this activity during the course of the semester and seemed to get the most out of it when we did it a second time with theses they were working on for an upcoming paper. The key to this activity being a success is preparation in ensuring that students understand the terms before the activity begins. The theses all need to be on a topic or content that the students share knowledge of in common so that they

can engage in the process of gathering evidence, etc. for theses they have not written. This activity is the one thing I do in my class in which every student is actively engaged during the entire project. They all know they cannot let down the next student, and thus all stay on task every time we try this activity. The public nature of the work seems to inspire all to do their best.

Work Cited

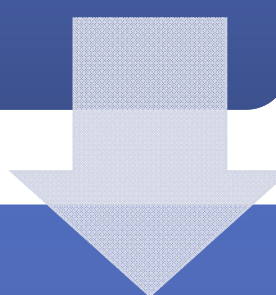
Ramage, John D., John C. Bean, and June Johnson. *Writing Arguments: A Rhetoric with Readings*. 9th ed. London: Longman, 2011.

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Write an enthymeme.

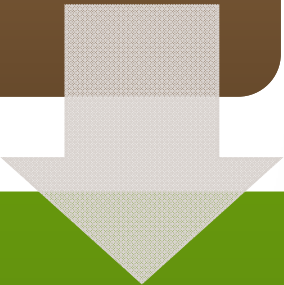
Statement plus



reason or
“because” clause.

Sample Enthymeme

The public should not support marine parks and “swim with dolphins” programs

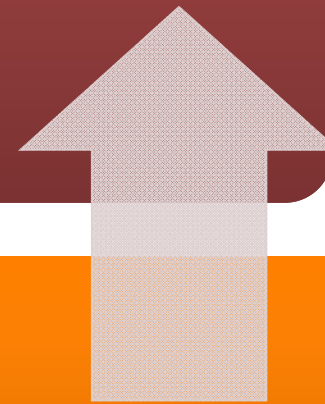


because these programs separate dolphins from their natural habitat and social groups.

“Warrant” means the underlying assumption.

The public should not support marine parks and “swim with dolphins” programs because these programs separate dolphins from their natural habitat and social groups.

Warrant: Wild animals should remain in their natural habitats and social groups.



Provide the “grounds” in support of the “because” clause.

because these programs separate dolphins from their natural habitat and social groups.

Statistics about the excessive number of performances or about the levels of stress hormones produced in captive dolphins

In the wild, dolphins swim in pods forty miles a day in the open ocean; whereas, marine park tanks provide only a tiny fraction of that space.

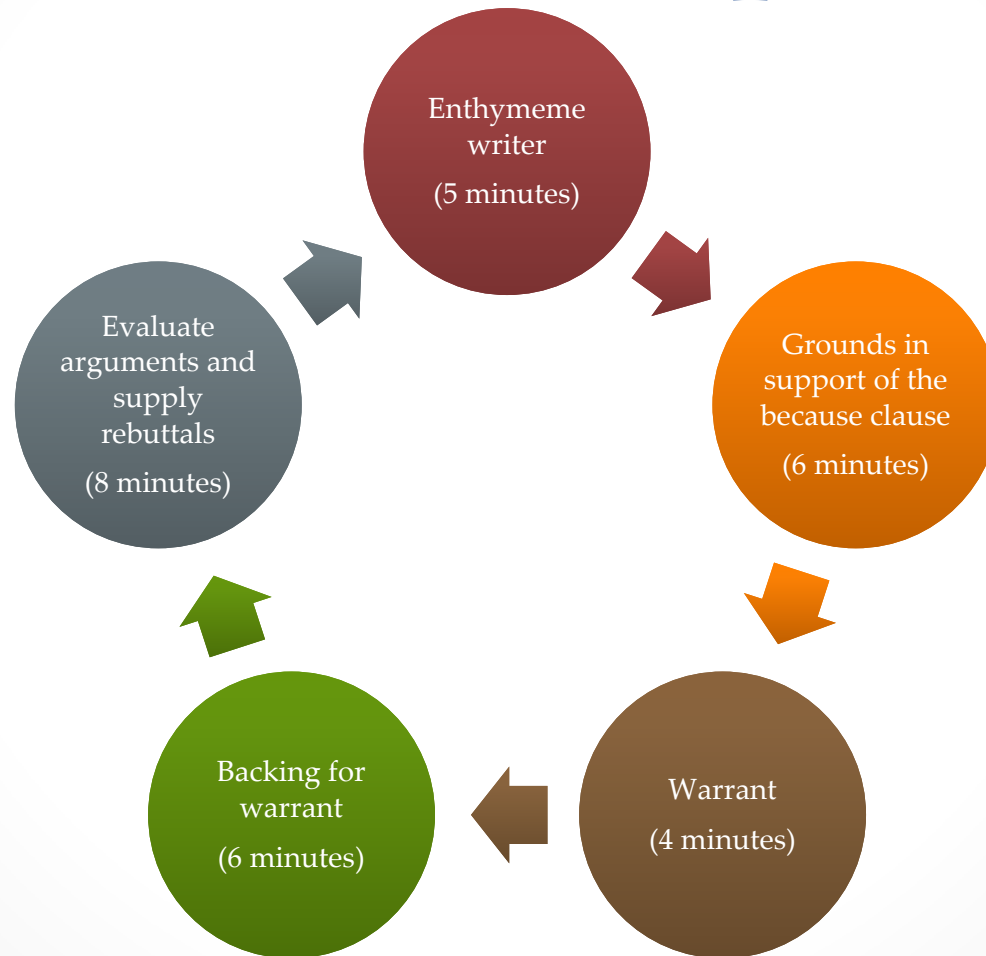
Provide “backing” (evidence and arguments in support of) for the warrant.

Warrant: Wild animals should remain free in their natural habitats and social groups.

Examples of wild animals in zoos and aquariums who have not thrived

Argue that humans should not treat animals as instruments for their own enjoyment or profit.

Our 5 Steps



Write an enthymeme.

- Use the homework on a political proposition to develop an enthymeme using one of the kinds of argument types we have read about for the past two weeks: definition, resemblance, causal, evaluation, ethical, or proposal . (Vote yes because..., prop X is a good idea because..., the passage of prop X will cause Y, because...)
- Write/rewrite this enthymeme at the very top of a clean sheet of paper legibly, initial it, and pass it on to your neighbor to your left when the five minutes have ended.



Write the grounds.

- Write evidence and support for the “because” clause of the enthymeme. Remember—this is in support of the thesis statement in your hand and not necessarily in accord with your own beliefs.
- You have six minutes.
- Hand it to the person on your left when you are asked to do so.



What is the underlying warrant of the enthymeme you received?

- You have four minutes.
- Write legibly and then fold the paper so the original thesis is concealed and only your warrant is visible.
- Hand it to the person to your left when you are asked to do so.



Write the backing of the warrant.

- Provide three kinds of evidence or argument in support of the warrant.
- Remember that this evidence should match the warrant and not necessarily your own beliefs.
- You have 6 minutes, after which you will be asked to hand your paper to the person on the left.



Evaluate the arguments.

Write down your thoughts:

- Checkmark what you feel are the strong statements and briefly jot down notes for potential rebuttals of any of the statements/evidence as they come to mind.
- What was stronger, the backing or the grounds?
- Can you imagine different audiences or different purposes for which the writer might want to flip the “because” clause and the warrant?
- Share with us orally examples of what worked well.

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Return our collective work to the original writer.

- How did your thesis come out?
- Did anything surprise you in this process?
- Would you change anything about your original thesis after going through this process?

