



Argument in Business Writing

SOM Business Writing Topics -- Argument in Business Writing

Business and/or management writing in the United States and Western Europe tends to be both problem-solving and persuasive -- relying heavily on "argumentation." For example:

- A memo may be written to inform employees of changes in procedures, while simultaneously employing logic to convince them to adopt the procedures as soon as possible.
- An audit report may appear to be both technical and neutral or objective in content and tone, but yet contain interpretations or alternative solutions to problems, and thus implicitly persuade.
- Sales letters, proposals and marketing campaigns are explicitly persuasive, relying on a variety of strategies, often emotional, to motivate their audiences to act.

In each of these cases, writers construct arguments that appeal to the readers, employing a range of "rhetorical" strategies to achieve their aims.

Readers need information in order to act appropriately, and they also need reasons that convince them to act or think differently. Reasons may be logical, or they may be based on emotion, and/or, on a reader's assessment of the "ethos" or credibility of the writer. Arguments supply evidence and reasons.

Stephen Toulmin in **The Uses of Argument** (1969, pp. 85-113) proposed a useful model for analyzing and constructing the arguments that form the foundation of our speaking and writing strategies. The two most important elements of his model are data (D): facts serving as the basis for a claim; and the claim (C): a conclusion or generalization to establish or support.

Also important in the model are:

- warrants (W), which are general authorizing statements justifying the logical "leap" from data to claim (a warrant may also be called a "bridge")
- backing (B), which is the information that supports or offers a foundation for the warrant statement
- reservations (R), which are statements of possible exceptions to the warrant, or alternative explanations than the warrant and claim originally offered
- qualifiers (Q), which are specific estimates of the degree of certainty associated with any claim

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In one business document a writer may use the Toulmin model several times, since even simple letters make claims. For example, "Satisfaction Guaranteed" is a claim that requires some kind of supporting evidence or data (of how the company will stand behind its product/service).

Explaining the uses of Toulmin's model, Kitty Locker offers examples of how office memos make claims in **Business and Administrative Communication** (1995, pp. 260-264). She and others have observed that when business writers draft (memos, letters, proposals or reports), they often adopt a plan of action consisting of strategies that include elements of Toulmin's model:

- Build common ground or rapport.
- Articulate the problem and offer proof that it exists.
- Demonstrate how the problem is harming the organization and suggest plausible causes.
- Rebut any counterclaims about alternative problems or causes other than the one the writer identifies (i.e., counteract opposing interpretations; clarify exceptions).
- Present a particular solution to the problem in specific terms that are tied to the stated problem and its causes.
- Construct a clear picture or description of the problem being solved by application of the proposed solution; depict a "win-win" situation.
- Limit the claims about additional benefits that might accrue to the readers -- benefits that might flow from the solution, but that are not guaranteed (i.e., qualify or make clear the limits of one's promises).
- Outline a plan of action, especially first steps toward arriving at a solution.

The Toulmin model, and elaborations of it, are valuable because they call our attention to the important role of basic arguments in extended efforts to motivate and persuade. Historically, **inscientific** arguments logical "syllogisms" have been employed to achieve absolute, verifiable conclusions. In **social** problems, where logic may not be the prime motivator, "enthymemes" (deliberately truncated or incomplete syllogisms, or vivid examples) direct readers or listeners to arrive at the best possible, but only "probable" conclusions. Enthymemes are prominent in political and legal speeches, and oral communication generally.

Both syllogisms and enthymemes are important to learn and practice (see J. Michael Sproule (*Argument*, 1980, for explanations of both of these forms), but the Toulmin model is especially helpful to business writers.

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Locker suggests that business writers decide how much of the model to use by analyzing the reader and the situation -- making the claim (C) and evidence (D) explicit unless you are sure the reader will act on what you say with questioning it, including the warrant in most cases (W), making the backing explicit, especially if there is a need to document sources of evidence (B), always offering rebuttals to counterclaims (R), and limiting or qualifying claims whose truth is uncertain or relative (Q).

By mapping an example of a Toulmin model, we can see how it might be used in practice:

Example of a Toulmin Model of an Elaborated Argument

(D) Alison bought an electronic organizer; therefore, (Q) undoubtedly (C) Alison owns other computers. since (W) Electronic organizers require computer skills unless (R) Alison was taught to use it after she bought it ... because (B) Sharp Wizard ownership records indicate that 89% of electronic organizers are purchased by people who already own and know how to use two or more computers.

Any reader can use the Toulmin model to find evidence of the strength or weakness of a claim. For example, according to the Toulmin model, if proof (data, warrant, backing) are weak and there are many reservations or qualifications, we have grounds for questioning the claim. There are special benefits for business writers of using Toulmin's model, however.

- They are more apt to employ **a variety of strategies** -- ethos, pathos, and logos-based -- that is,

relying on character or credibility, emotions, and/or logic -- whereas syllogisms rely only on logical proof.

- They are also more likely to be **explicit** about offering evidence, stating warrants, and so forth; in contrast, enthymemes rely on the audience to supply missing information or conclusions.
- They are also more apt to qualify claims in accordance with the strength or weakness of the evidence -- a strategy that lessens the tendency to "over-commit" -- to make promises one can't keep, sweeping generalizations, and/or unsupported claims. (A very important factor in business writing, especially in sales and marketing).

Note the elements of Toulmin's model (as well as some elements of the writing plan of action outlined on p. 2) in the memo on the following page:

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ABBA Systems, Inc.

Date: September 15, 1995

From: Stephen Jones

To: Samantha Ellsworth

Subject: Improving inDhome delivery and assembly procedures

You indicated that some customers are finding it hard to schedule inDhome delivery and assembly of HEC's, because salespeople on the floor don't know the correct procedures for ordering the service (warrant)., so some customers are canceling orders when delivery is not prompt, causing a loss in sales (common ground) that we need to address as soon as possible (claim).

Recently I received a call from an irate customer who said she had indeed cancelled her order (data). Even after several phone calls, she didn't have an appointment, and after two weeks when the product still had not been delivered, she purchased it elsewhere, at a lower price, even though she had to pick it up and assemble it herself (data). The recent opening of XYX Discount has created even greater competition; because their prices are lower, customers may decide not to take advantage of our service. As you know, the service carries a greater profit potential than the slim margin on the product, so we need to make scheduling much easier for the customer. (proof of/degree of damage noted)

Based on analysis of the orders, most sales people are processing the orders correctly (rebuttal). The customers, however, run into problems scheduling delivery (repeating claim), because there is at present no direct way for the customer to speak to the delivery and assembly persons (establishing warrant), and the phone operators are also not routing these calls correctly (backing). To correct this, we need to set up a direct line to the delivery and assembly department, designate a scheduler to contact the customer directly, and provide phone operators with the correct numbers, personnel names, and procedures (outlining a plan of action).

With an efficient way to schedule delivery, busy customers will experience less frustration -- they will communicate with those who actually deliver the service; salespeople will be out of the loop after having properly processed the delivery order (except to handle complaints about product defects or to handle returns). These new procedures should ensure that we do not lose "sold" customers to our competition, if the changes are implemented immediately (qualifier / benefits).

In order to get this plan into action, I recommend that you order an 800 line, for use solely by the delivery and assembly crew, and that you promote the senior crew member to the position of scheduler. I will update the sales and telecommunications personnel concerning the anticipated change as soon as you notify me of your approval. Finally, although they are not the source of the problem, it is certainly a good idea to ensure as well that salespeople continue to be trained to provide this service, and that they be informed about any changes made (reservation). In the interim, they should continue to inform the customer what to do if the scheduler fails to call within 5 days of ordering the service.

References

Locker, K. (1995). Business and administrative communication. Irwin.

Sproule, J. M. (1980) Argument: Language and its influence. McGraw Hill.

Toulmin, S. E. (1969). The uses of argument. Cambridge: UP.

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