Teaching Students How to Tame the Warrant with the Toulmin Model in EFL/ESL Settings

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Abstract

This teaching practice paper deals with some practical ideas of teaching the concept of 'warrant' in Toulmin's mode of argumentation within EFL/ESL settings. While most students are familiar with making claims and providing evidence to support them, they may not understand the role of the warrant in connecting claims and reasons. Therefore, there is a strong need for teaching students how warrant plays a key role in argumentative writing. This teaching practice paper aims at bridging the gulf between some writing theories and useful examples to dissect the complexities of teaching warrant in writing classes.

Introduction

In a composition class, an academic writing teacher steps into a classroom and writes "What does a warrant mean?" on the whiteboard, grinning at the students. One of the students raises their hand and asks the teacher, "Is today's writing class about a crime?" The teacher smiles and utters: "No, today's lesson is all about how to see an 'invisible statement that provides the logical connection between the claim and reason. We call this invisible statement a warrant. Now, warrants are tricky precisely because they are invisible'" (Graff & Birkenstein, 2024, p. 94). This humorous classroom example suggests that 'warrant' is still a new idea for many students and writing teachers. Students are encouraged to write different forms of writing, but most writing teachers may not have incorporated the idea of warrant into their syllabi.

Argumentative writing demands a painstaking set of tasks. It comprises a series of steps to be accomplished. A scholar makes a claim, looks for evidence to support it, synthesizes different viewpoints and makes a conclusion. The power of argumentation rests in how an author convinces their intended readers. Sometimes an author may give a reason, yet readers might fail to see a connection between a claim and a reason. This is when a strong need for an explicit warrant is expected to justify the connection between a claim and a reason. Despite having a collection of claims, reasons, evidence, and insightful explanations, effective communication cannot occur if intended readers do not see them work as a unit.

Difficulty in writing argumentative pieces often relates to underdeveloped skills in developing complex arguments and a dearth of a structured argument template for students (Crowhurst 1990). Numerous students dread the process of constructing an argument because they have not been exposed to such a process or they do not find it necessary (Bacha, 2010). To make the matter worse, most students find writing a frustrating activity (Sherma, 2024).

Most students are likely familiar with Aristotle's three rhetorical appeals—ethos, pathos, and logos. In America, many universities have designed writing courses where students must produce term papers using these three lenses, despite some objections that "it lost its prestige with the coming of Enlightenment and, after, of positivism. This was possibly due to the non-scientific character of argument as compared to scientific demonstration" (Magalhães, 2020, p.

1). Similarly, de Oliveira (2014) notes the declining trend of Aristotelian Rhetoric and its steady removal from secondary school curricula since the 19th century (p. 19).

Despite the decline in the popularity of traditional argumentation, Stephen Toulmin introduced a more pragmatic method of argumentative writing. His work on argumentation, particularly the Toulmin model, has been influential worldwide and is used in various educational contexts across the globe. Toulmin's framework can be integrated with project-based learning (PBL), problem-based learning, think-pair-share, table discussions, and more. Toulmin's six components of argument are popular and widely used across the world.

The Toulmin Model

Endorsing Toulmin's emphasis on the coherent relationship between claims, reasons, and evidence, Meiland (1983) prioritized teachers' role in helping students brainstorm rough ideas and organize them the way claims, reasons and evidence are organized. For idea generation, coherence and argumentation, Toulmin's model is a valuable framework for the field of rhetoric, as it has the power to generate new ideas for intended audiences and is adaptable (Karbach, 1987) for writing class activities. Furthermore, the Toulmin model can be applied to writing argumentative essays because it is scalable, useful as a heuristic, and can be taught effectively (Siregar et al., 2021).

In accordance with the Toulmin model, every argument begins with a *claim* that has to be supported by data/evidence/reason. For example, a student's claim might be *people should ride a bicycle* based on the fact that *a bicycle does not pollute the environment*. This transition from a claim to data/evidence (ground) is reinforced by a generally understood statement—the *warrant*. In this example, the warrant or the acceptable principle or statement could be written as *when/if people ride a bicycle, they do not harm the environment*. Support for this warrant is called *backing*—for instance, *A study has shown that cycling minimizes carbon footprint and noise pollution.* And words that limit the force of a statement are understood to be *qualifiers*—for example, *Almost every person should buy a bicycle*. And exceptions to the claim are known as *conditions of rebuttal*—for example, *People who ride a bicycle can be exhausted.* The Toulmin model provides a simple framework, so everyone can structure their arguments. The framework is so adaptable that it can be applied across different disciplines and cultures, and teachers can help students to grasp its concept.

When it comes to teaching 'warrant', it may look a bit complex at first. Among the six components of the Toulmin model, grasping the idea of warrant may demand more effort because it is elusive in nature—they are invisible or general propositions that connect claims and reasons. If students are exposed to this framework (fig. 1), they tend to feel the necessity of the warrant and incorporate warrants into their argumentative writing. The figure shows that the claim *People should ride a bicycle* is very general. Some questions arise: Should everyone ride a bicycle including those who are physically challenged? So, a wise writer narrows down their claims with the help of a qualifier. The claim can be narrowed down further—*Almost every person should ride a bicycle*. This claim excludes those who are not capable of doing it. To support the claim, we always need grounds. For example, *A bicycle does not pollute the environment* (fact). The principle that links the claim and the grounds is *If people ride a bicycle, they do not harm the environment*. This warrant (principle) is not a formula. It can be rephrased in several ways. For example, the warrant can be re-written as *Riding a bicycle is environment friendly* or *Riding a bicycle protects the environment.* When readers are likely to have difficulty connecting a claim and a reason, an explicit warrant is required. When the connection between a claim and a reason seems obvious, an implicit warrant is believed to work.
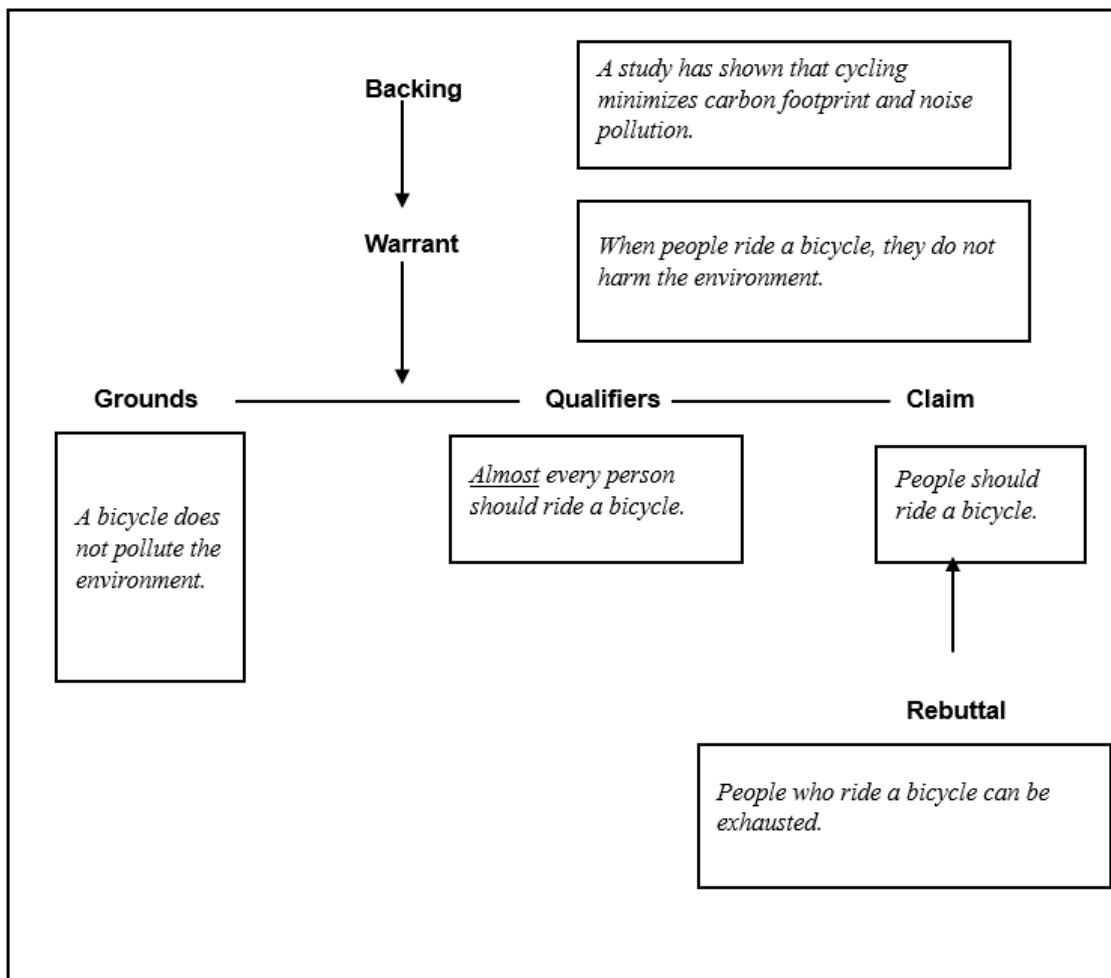
Figure 1: Toulmin's six components of argument (adapted from Purdue Online Writing Lab (n.d.)

Need for a Warrant in Your Argument

It is the writer who can decide when to add a warrant to their argument. Or, the writer can ask a reader whether a warrant is needed or not. If this is not possible, the author can consider the following key points to evaluate the need for a warrant. The following examples have been adapted from Wood's (2012) book *First-Year Writing: Perspectives on Argument*.
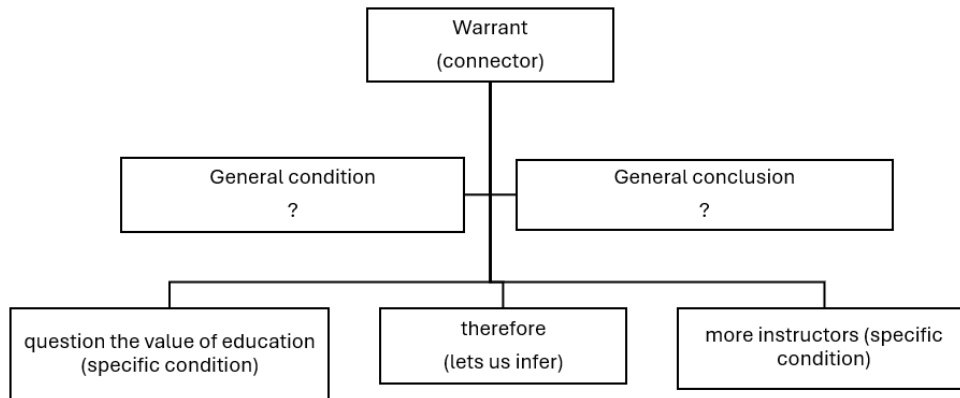
1. We need a warrant if our intended readers do not seem to agree immediately with our reasons that support our claim.

Example 1:

> Our college needs more English composition instructors [claim] because we question the value of our education given the rising tuition costs [reason 1]. Tuition has increased at a rate higher than inflation [reason 2]. In 2023, inflation was 2.4%, but tuition rose 5.1% [evidence].

As a reader, the college principal might ask the student to connect their claim and the reason. The principal does agree with the reason that has been given to support the claim.

Here, the principal is not stating they reject either the reason or the claim. They cannot imagine any principle that would make the claim follow the reason.

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        │ General condition│──────┼───────│ General conclusion│
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   │question the value of │ │  therefore  │ │more instructors      │
   │education             │ │(lets us infer)│ │(specific condition)  │
   │(specific condition)  │ │             │ │                      │
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Figure 2: How readers might question the connection between a claim and a reason

Sometimes, we struggle to pick a general principle to connect our claim and a reason. So, the following suggestions can be useful:

> i. You should replace your specific terms with general ones.

> We question the value of education given the rising tuition costs, so our college needs more English composition instructors.

Revised: *We question the value equal to our cost, so we deserve to receive more services or classes.*

> ii. You should rephrase the general version with a when/if:

> If/When we question the value equal to our cost, we deserve more services or classes.

But if we have already picked a general principle to build consensus on a controversial issue, we are more likely to begin our argument with a warrant.

> TOEFL scores can be seen as an accurate reflection of English language proficiency of non-native speakers of English [warrant]. In that view, most French students are proficient in English [claim] given that their average score on the TOEFL test is 100 out of 120 [reason].

2. Our warrant should be applicable to everyone.

Sometimes what seems natural to argue may seem strange to others.

> The editor of *The Kathmandu Times* believes that a college has neglected student well-being [reason], so they feel justified in expressing this concern in an editorial [claim].

Here, the writer's principle/warrant may look like this:

> When a newspaper editor has an opinion, they have the right to publish it.

Is it acceptable to everyone? Can an editor publish whatever they like? Is it not dangerous?

3. The warrant should be applicable to both the claim and the reason.

Some warrants are generally acceptable but become problematic when applied to extreme cases. Consider the following example.

> Mr. Gurung lent Mr. Einstein one thousand dollars [reason], therefore Mr. Einstein should help Mr. Gurung wash his entire family's clothes [claim]. After all, one good turn deserves another [warrant].

Does the claim make sense based on the reason? We should help someone if they have helped us. But in the example, the warrant is applicable to the reason. The claim cannot be validated here by the reason at any cost.

4. Our warrant has to be appropriate to their cultures.

Warrants can also fail due to their appropriateness rather than their truth or reasoning. Some warrants are commonly accepted by most people.

Common-sense warrants do not always apply in the law, because other warrants may trump them. For example:

> When/If people fail to meet their legal obligations, even unintentionally, they must face the consequences.

More specifically:

> When/If a citizen forgets to renew their driving license, a traffic officer can confiscate their car and sell it.

Here, the fear is that the warrant justifies something unacceptable that people with common sense can understand. The warrant means that if a traffic officer finds a guilty driver, they can claim ownership of the driver's car. Therefore, law students must understand that justice is to be defined based on what we think about it. Laws should be defined and imposed by the court.
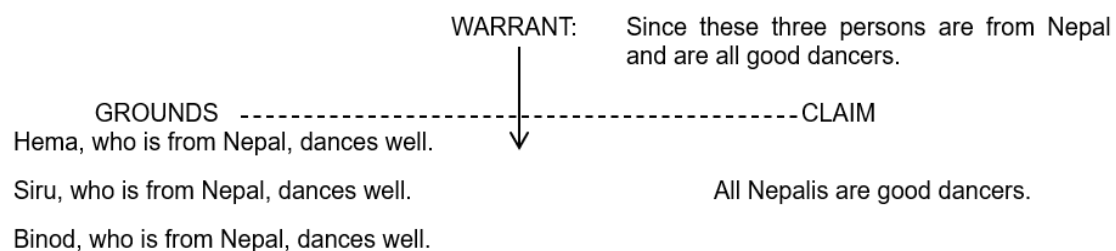
Taming the Warrant

Among the six components of argumentation, the relationship between the claim, warrant, and grounds is highly significant. Teaching warrants can be a new idea to many writing instructors. In spite of it, warrants can be 'tamed', or students can be helped to conceptualize warrant as an underlying principle or idea that motivates readers psychologically to accept the connection between a claim and a reason. Warrants are "general hypothetical statements, which can act as bridges, and authorize the sort of step to which our particular argument commits us" (Toulmin, 2003, p. 129). It is important to remember that "we use warrants less often than other elements of an argument because readers usually accept the connection between a claim and its reason without even thinking that they need a principle to connect them" (Wood, 2012). Sometimes we bore or insult readers by supplying warrants even if readers do not expect them. The main concern is that we do not know when our readers may need a warrant for our claims. Hence, it is better to ask someone to read our drafts; they may tell us when connections between reasons and claims are problematic or not convincing.

To get a better understanding of how the warrant shapes the formation of inductive, deductive, and analogical reasoning, Toulmin's simple template of claim–grounds–warrant can be used to structure arguments regardless of the type of reasoning applied. Figures 3–5 demonstrate how Toulmin's model comprises inductive, deductive, and analogical reasoning. Once students become conversant with the Toulmin model, they tend to think and write more logically and structurally to persuade their readers into believing what they are advocating through writing.

Inductive /Deductive/Analogical Reasoning

In Figure 3, an example of inductive reasoning is presented, illustrating how multiple specific facts, supported by a general conclusion drawn from those facts, lead to a general premise or claim. The following figures have been adapted from Joan Karbach (1987).

WARRANT: Since these three persons are from Nepal and are all good dancers.

GROUNDS --CLAIM
Hema, who is from Nepal, dances well.

Siru, who is from Nepal, dances well.   All Nepalis are good dancers.

Binod, who is from Nepal, dances well.

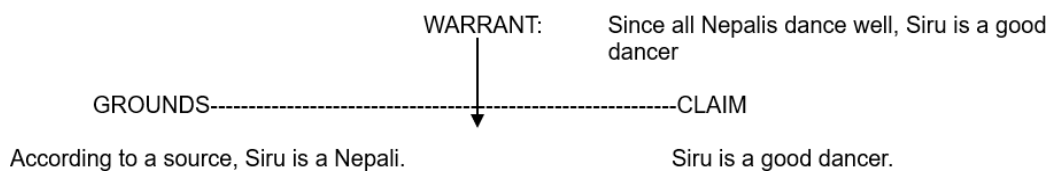**Figure 3: Specific observations lead to a general belief**

When we turn an argument like figure 3 upside down in figure 4, the diagram illustrates how a general belief, supported by some facts and conclusions, leads to a specific fact. The syllogism is the basic method of deducting reasoning. In his *Prior Analytics*, Aristotle introduced the syllogism as a structure to evaluate the validity of deductive arguments (Parfitt, 2016). In simple words, a syllogism has two related premises and a conclusion:

> All Nepalis are good dancers. [Major premise]

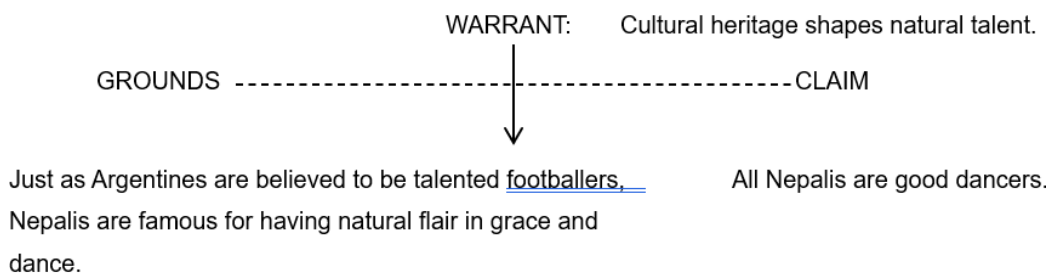> Siru is a Nepali. [Minor premise]

> Therefore, Siru is a good dancer. [Conclusion]

In fact, we rarely argue by syllogisms, but they show how the validity of an argument can be subjected to strict and precise analysis. "In everyday reasoning, we often omit the middle statement, resulting in what Aristotle called an *enthymeme*" (Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, p. 135). Therefore, the above syllogism can be written as "Since all Nepalis are good dancers, Siru is believed to dance well." (Figure 4).

WARRANT: Since all Nepalis dance well, Siru is a good dancer

GROUNDS--CLAIM

According to a source, Siru is a Nepali.   Siru is a good dancer.

Figure 4: General statement leads to a specific conclusion

In Figure 5, the diagram illustrates analogical reasoning by showing how multiple similarities between two different objects, supported by a general conclusion about those similarities, lead to a specific claim.

WARRANT: Cultural heritage shapes natural talent.

GROUNDS --CLAIM

Just as Argentines are believed to be talented footballers,   All Nepalis are good dancers.
Nepalis are famous for having natural flair in grace and
dance.

Figure 5: A general conclusion about two similarities leads to a specific claim

The reasoning does not seem reliable, but all the diagrams above exhibit how all the varieties of reasoning can fit into the simple template of claim–grounds–warrant in argumentative writing. Such a model's potential to include formal logic indicates the possibility of effective teaching and gives a clear picture of it. These simple structures have allowed many instructors to use this template as a tool for learning and problem-solving. When a writing instructor introduces the idea of warrant in their classroom, most students may view it as a complex idea or theory. However, teaching students step-by-step, using different prompts such as charts, figures, drawings on the boards and adequate practice, can help writing instructors to accomplish their teaching objectives.

Differentiating Between Reasons and Warrants

At first glance, our students might mistake a reason for a warrant or vice-versa. They look same in form, but they are not. Both reasons and warrants are added to support a claim. Reading the following example can give us some ideas.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai should be depicted as a brave girl [claim]. *The first reason is that she spoke out publicly against the prohibition despite Taliban threats*

[statement 1]. *The second reason is that any person should be labelled as brave for their fearless action* [statement 2].

Here, these two statements support the claim in different ways. So, we should have different names for them. The first one specifically refers to Malala. It is a reason. But the second one has nothing specifically to do with Malala. It is a general proposition that applies to anyone's act of bravery. We call it a 'warrant'. Warrants are not used for any specific context but rather for any general situation.

In layperson's terms, warrants are reasons that connect a reason and a claim—"One of our students called warrants extended reasons" (Wood, 2012, p. 229). Reasons are not warrants as such, but they capture a bit of what a warrant does. A warrant spans a conceptual area similar to the reason and claim but is much broader, encompassing an indefinite number of other reasons and claims.

How to Review Warrant Cases

The more we use warrants in our day-to-day lives, the more easily we understand what warrants are. Look at the conversation between Sophia and David. This conversation demonstrates how sometimes claims, reasons, and warrants may not be compatible with each other. Writing teachers can do this activity as the last recap task to reinforce the understanding of warrants in argumentative writing.

> Sophia: Although most people condemn graffiti, I think it should be accepted as artistic work [claim] because it is informative and artistic [reason].
>
> David: It may be true. But why does that count as a reason for accepting it as artistic work? It barely makes sense to me.

Now, Sophia has to offer this warrant: *When artistic work relays information and reflects someone's feelings, it should not be criticized*. Upon knowing the warrant, David may still ask three more questions:

1. Is your warrant true?

David is likely to refute Sophia's warrant partially or completely, claiming that too much graffiti may deface clean walls, and endorse unethical images or nonsensical information. Or, he is likely to bring up a warrant that opposes Sophia's original purpose:

> Any graffiti must be criticized if it is ugly, misguiding and nonsensical. When art challenges human ethics, it should be beyond public accessibility. That should outweigh complete freedom of expression.

In this situation, in order to convince David, Sophia must make the scope of her original warrant more specific or look for another.

2. Is your specific reason a valid example of the first part of your warrant?

David is likely to accept Sophia's warrant as true—that we should not impose any restrictions on someone's artistic creation that reflects cultural significance or someone's feelings. However, he may still think that graffiti does not deserve to be an example of 'artistic creation'. Hence, Sophia's warrant does not cover his reason. In this case, Sophia must make a convincing argument or customize her warrant to accommodate differences in reason.

3. Is your specific claim a valid instance of the second part of your warrant?

Although David agrees with Sophia's warrant and reason, he is unlikely to accept her argument if he thinks her claim makes sense to the concluding part of her warrant. He is expected to refute the claim that accepting graffiti as artistic creation is not a valid instance of 'not criticizing' them because the warrant forces us to put up with art on walls, not to accept it, as in David's

claim. In this situation, Sophia is left with three options: (i) change her warrant to make it better, like *popular artistic work should be accepted as an expression*; (ii) weaken her claim, like *graffiti should be tolerated*; or (iii) make a convincing argument.

Implications of Teaching Warrant

Teaching students how to 'tame' warrant in argumentative writing can offer several positive implications. In writing classes or courses, the Toulmin model of argument is very important (Qin & Erkan, 2010). There is a growing demand for individuals who can argue, persuade, and reason in English as well as other languages in different fields such as marketing, politics, education, law, public policy and journalism. More importantly, it is crucial in order to safeguard democracy. We, writing teachers, have a huge responsibility to equip our students with such competence by deepening their understanding of the role of warrants in their arguments. An insightful understanding of using warrants allows students to generate ideas and organize them coherently and cohesively because the flow of arguments is premised on the assumption that debatable claims are well structured and substantiated. When students begin to use warrants in their arguments, they also realize how their cultural contexts influence their argumentative communication. For example, "it is no surprise that student writers in the United States are expected to make their structures direct and their claims explicit, leaving little unspoken" (Lunsford & Ruszkiewicz, p. 163). However, in some cultures, central claims or theses are to be introduced implicitly. Student writers will also realize why people use proverbs in their everyday lives. In Nepal, both highly educated and illiterate people use proverbs regularly to support their claims. People do not know the theoretical significance, yet they use proverbs as warrants, and nobody rebuts these warrants. An ordinary Nepali can say, "Hard work can lead anyone to success [claim]. My friend works twelve hours a day [ground]. You reap what you sow" [warrant].

Moreover, students learn to read every argumentative piece with critical eyes and immediately trace if there are weaknesses or any biases in it. Student writers also can do insightful analyses of their intended audiences so that they can adjust their claims or arguments to cater to the needs of their audiences. Writing practice using warrants can hone students' confidence and help them to share their ideas clearly, following logical structures (claim–ground–warrant). Toulmin's model can help students strengthen their arguments in both academic and non-academic settings (Lunsford & Ruszkiewicz, 2019). Toulmin's framework can be customized to shape students' argumentative power regardless of what language they speak. According to proponents of rhetoric and argumentation, argumentative writing is rewarding in all spheres of human life because argumentation entails critical thinking, logic, reasoning, cohesion and a proper structure of ideas.

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