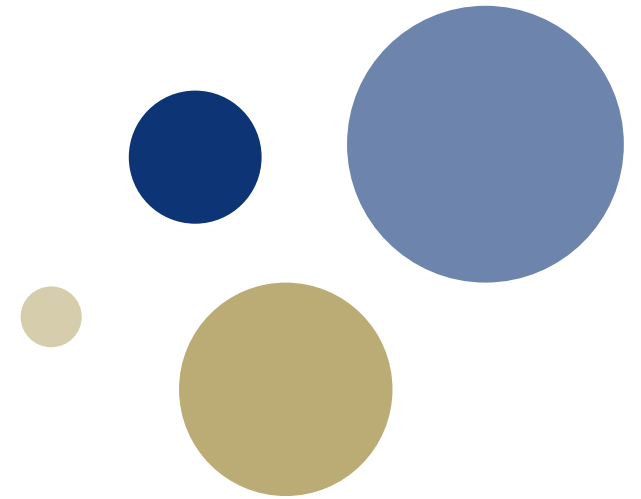




Centre for Academic and
Professional Communication



**A corpus-based comparative study of the first paragraph of
argumentative texts written by Iranian and Norwegian
learners of English**

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Research on what might affect text structure in argumentative writing:

BACKGROUND

Different perspectives in existing literature:

- 1) Cultural background most important factor
- 2) Discipline most important
- 3) There are more factors, such as influence from instructional practices, variations in teachers' definitions of rationality, ...

General

- Kaplan (1966)
- Hinds (1978)
- Yoshikawa (1978)
- Kubota (1992)
- Leki (1991)
- Mauranen (1993)
- Newell, Bloom, and Hirvela (2015)
- Hyland (2019)
- Walton, Reed, and Macagno (2008)
- Van Eemeren (2021)

Norwegian

- Evensen (1989)
- Berge, Evensen, Hertzberg, and Vagle (2005)
- Dahl (2004)
- Solli and Ødemark (2019)
- Øgreid and Hertzberg (2009)
- Ørevik (2019)

Iranian

- Rashidi and Dastkheyr (2009)
- Abdollahzadeh, Amini Farsani, and Beikmohammadi (2017)
- Jalilifar, Keyvan, and Don (2017)

OVERALL AIM OF THE PROJECT

- Investigate whether the argumentative style for writers correlate with different linguistic/cultural backgrounds
 - Is there a difference between Norwegian and Iranian background which is crucial for the argumentation style?
 - Is the essay topic significant in determining the argumentation style?

(cf. (Van Eemeren, 2021))

DATA

- The sub-corpora of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLEv3)
- 20 texts written by Norwegian students and 20 texts written by Iranian students
- Majoring in English-related studies at university
 - Higher intermediate to advanced level of proficiency in English
 - Undergraduate level
 - Untimed condition
 - Not a part of an examination
 - No reference tools

STAGES OF A CRITICAL DISCUSSION ACCORDING TO VAN EEMEREN (2021)

1. **Confrontation stage**

2. **Opening stage**

3. **Argumentation stage**

4. **Concluding stage**

(Van Eemeren, 2021)

But does practical writing fit with theory? How do the Iranian and Norwegian writers structure their texts?

Confrontation stage: Writer's standpoint on a controversial issue is provided.

Opening stage: A starting point or point of departure is chosen by the writer to begin arguing for/against an issue.
Van Eemeren (2021)

Argumentation stage: the arguer defends his or her standpoint by putting forward arguments and counterarguments.

Concluding stage: the arguer points out the extent to which the difference of opinion can be resolved based on the previous paragraphs.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

- Three dimensions of argumentative style:
 - Topical choice
 - Audience demand
 - Presentational dimension



1. **Confrontation stage**
2. **Opening stage**
3. Argumentation stage
4. Conclusion stage

Van Eemeren (2021)

=> A need for more research

RESEARCH QUESTIONS IN THIS STUDY

- Aspects of argumentative style for each of the two groups (Norwegian and Iranian):
 - **Topic 1:** Main standpoint
 - a) Where is the main standpoint presented (first/last/never)?
 - b) With what degree of certainty is it presented (high/low)?
 - **Topic 2:** Arguments and counterarguments
 - a) What are the numbers of arguments and counterarguments (and their relative proportion)?
 - b) Do these numbers correlate with the standpoint presentation style?

Is cultural background crucial for these aspects of the texts?

TOPIC 1: MAIN STANDPOINT

- **Main standpoint:** The most central view that the arguer presents and builds his or her argument around.
- **RQ 1:** Where is the main standpoint presented? 4 possible values annotated for:
 1. Front-weighted
 2. End-weighted
 3. Standpoint avoidance
 4. (Off topic)
- **RQ 2:** With what degree of certainty is the main standpoint presented? 2 possible values annotated for:
 1. High certainty
 2. Low certainty

Cf. “topical choice’, Van Eemeren (2021)

FRONT- VERSUS END-WEIGHTED

- **Front-weighted:** The writer presents the standpoint in the initial part of the text and supports it by arguments and/or counterarguments that follow
- **End-weighted:** The writer starts by providing the supporting arguments and refuting counterarguments and at the end draws a conclusion.

FRONT-WEIGHTED

- **Essay topic:** Most university degrees are theoretical and do not prepare students for the real world. They are therefore of little value. Do you agree or disagree with the statement above?
- **Example (first paragraph):**
 - While some people believe that a university degree is very advantageous and it will help the students to function better in the real context, other believe that a university degree is completely theoretical and it doesn't necessary display the students' skills in the outer world. I personally agree with the first group because I believe that a university degree increases the knowledge of the individual, it improves their communication skills and it is the way to independence and taking responsibility for their actions.

END-WEIGHTED

- **First paragraph:**

In today's society, having a university degree is of the utmost importance if you want a job within a specific department. The university degree is supposed to prepare students for work in real life and give them the competence they need to execute a specific piece of work. Even though this is the aim, some students claim that what they learn in the university does not correspond to the practical work in real life. In this article, we will take a look at to what extent the university degree prepares the students, and if this degree alone satisfies the students' requirements.

- **Last paragraph:**

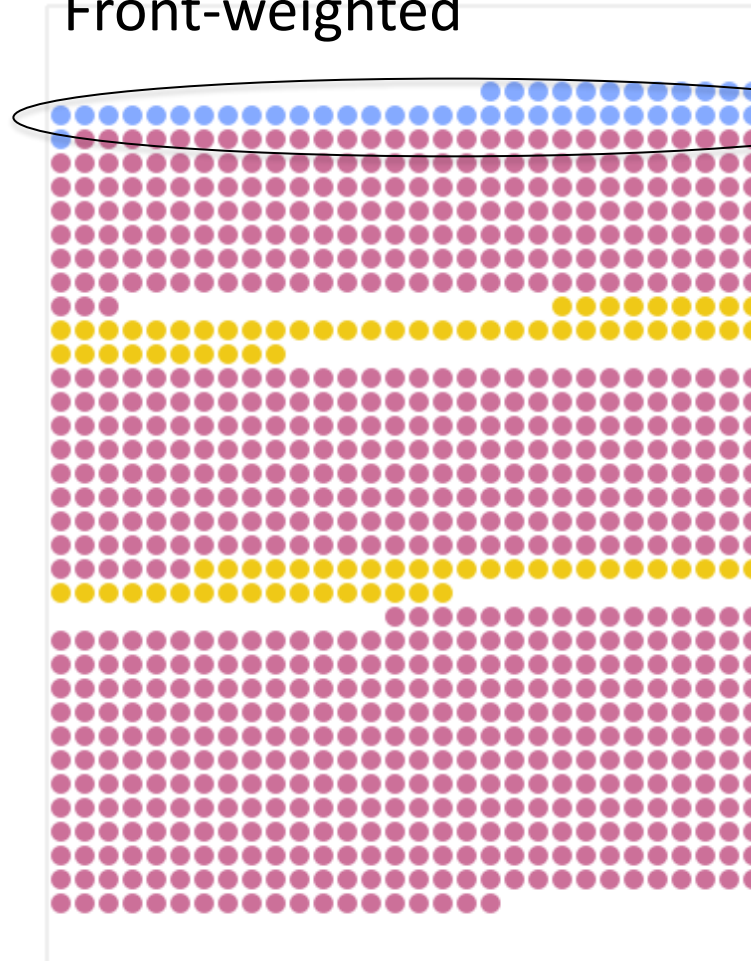
A combination between theory and experience will be extremely valuable out there in the real world. For about fifty - sixty years ago, you could get a job without a degree, but the people that I have talked to who had their degrees at that time, are convinced that their education gave them a huge advantage. To sum it up it can be said that university degrees are valuable because it gives the student a starting point and a certain amount of competence.

FRONT- VERSUS END-WEIGHTED TEXT MAP (BEGINNING)

End-weighted



Front-weighted



- **Light blue:** main standpoint with high certainty
- **Pink:** Argument
- **Yellow:** Counterargument
- **Brown:** Definitions
- **Green:** Argument schemes (e.g. analogy, symptomatic, etc.)

STANDPOINT AVOIDANCE

- **Standpoint avoidance:** The writer mentions that it is difficult or impossible to take a for/against standpoint with respect to the essay topic.

EXAMPLE (standpoint avoidance)

Topic: The prison system is outdated; no civilized society should punish its criminals. It should rehabilitate them. Do you agree or disagree with the statement above?

First paragraph:

Since there is no death penalty in Norway, criminals only lose their freedom when they are caught. This means that they are imprisoned, but they keep their right of speech, education, money and communication. One can argue whether this is the right way to handle criminality or not. Is this really the best way to prevent them from doing more wrong and to integrate them into society? (NOUO1038, Pos. 1)

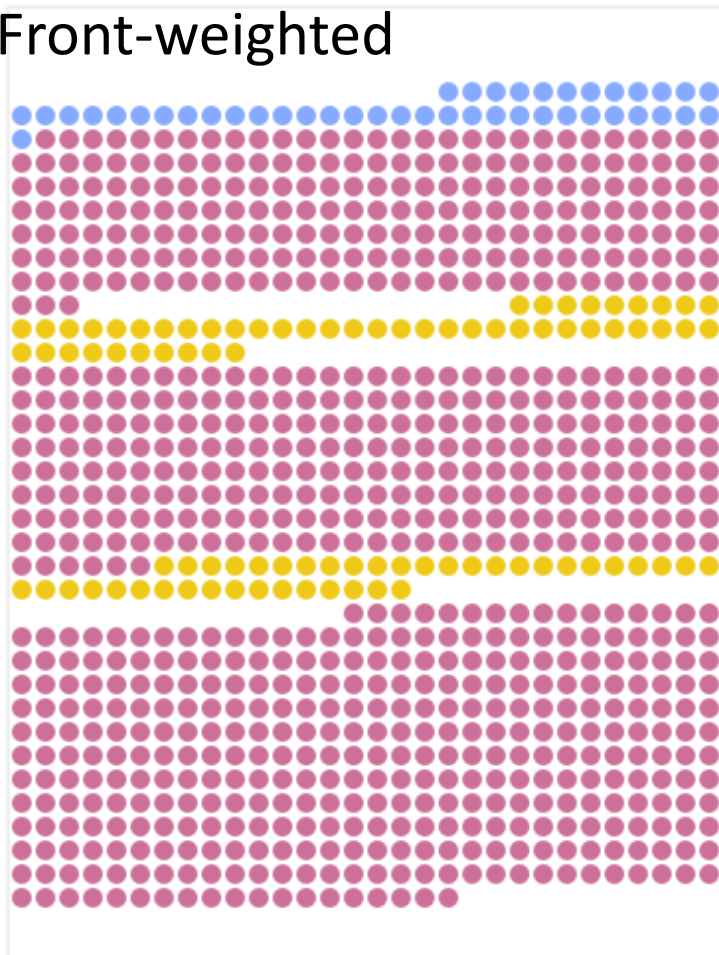
Last paragraph:

Nevertheless, all this "helping the criminals will be the best", might be a naive way of viewing the problem. It is not always so that the criminals are to be helped, and some of them will always end up as criminals again. Is this theory of helping them to lead a better life too simple? That is difficult to say for sure, but it may be a more up to date way of thinking, and maybe also the most human way to think. After all, "an eye for an eye" has proven so far not to be the best philosophy. Maybe now it's time to teach some humanity and say "walk away and sin no more."

(NOUO1038, Pos. 9)

STANDPOINT AVOIDANCE TEXT MAP

Front-weighted



Standpoint avoidance



Black: Standpoint avoidance

Light blue: Main standpoint with high certainty

Pink: Argument

Yellow: Counterargument

OFF TOPIC

- The writer does not address the essay topic and instead introduces a new alternative topic to elaborate on.

HIGH AND LOW CERTAINTY IN MAIN STANDPOINT

- **Certainty of main standpoint:** With what degree of certainty is the main standpoint presented? (i.e. with high or low certainty)?
- **High certainty:** The writer explicitly presents the main standpoint with high certainty, e.g. by using boosters to “emphasize force on writer’s certainty in proposition”, e.g. *obviously, definitely, clear, etc.*

Hyland (2010, p.129)

- **Low certainty:** The writer presents the main standpoint either implicitly or e.g. by using hedges to “withhold writer’s full commitment to propositions”, e.g. *might, perhaps, possible, could, etc.*
- Hyland (2010, p.129)

EXAMPLES (HIGH CERTAINTY IN FRONT-WEIGHTED TEXTS)

- **Norwegian (part of first paragraph):**

Topic: Feminists have done more harm to the cause of women than good

The statement "Feminists have done more harm to the cause of women than good" makes me angry, and I do not agree at all.

(NOAC1019, Pos. 1)

- **Iranian (part of first paragraph):**

Topic: The prison system is outdated; no civilized society should punish its criminals. It should rehabilitate them. Do you agree or disagree with the statement above?

I certainly like the notion of trying to reform criminals and reintegrate them into society.

(IRMA07020, Pos. 1)

EXAMPLES (LOW CERTAINTY IN FRONT-WEIGHTED TEXTS)

- **Norwegian (part of first paragraph):**

Topic: To Dream & Imagine in the 21st Century

I think I understand people that perhaps believe that there were more room for dreaming and imagination in earlier times.

(NOAG1009, Pos. 1)

- **Iranian (part of first paragraph):**

Topic: A man/woman's financial reward should be commensurate with their contribution to the society in which they live

Between these two ideologies the latter, which state that there should be a reasonable proportion between the financial reward and people's contribution to their society, seems more logical and compatible concerning the psyche and nature of human beings.

(IRMA14015, Pos. 1)

STANDPOINT AVOIDANCE

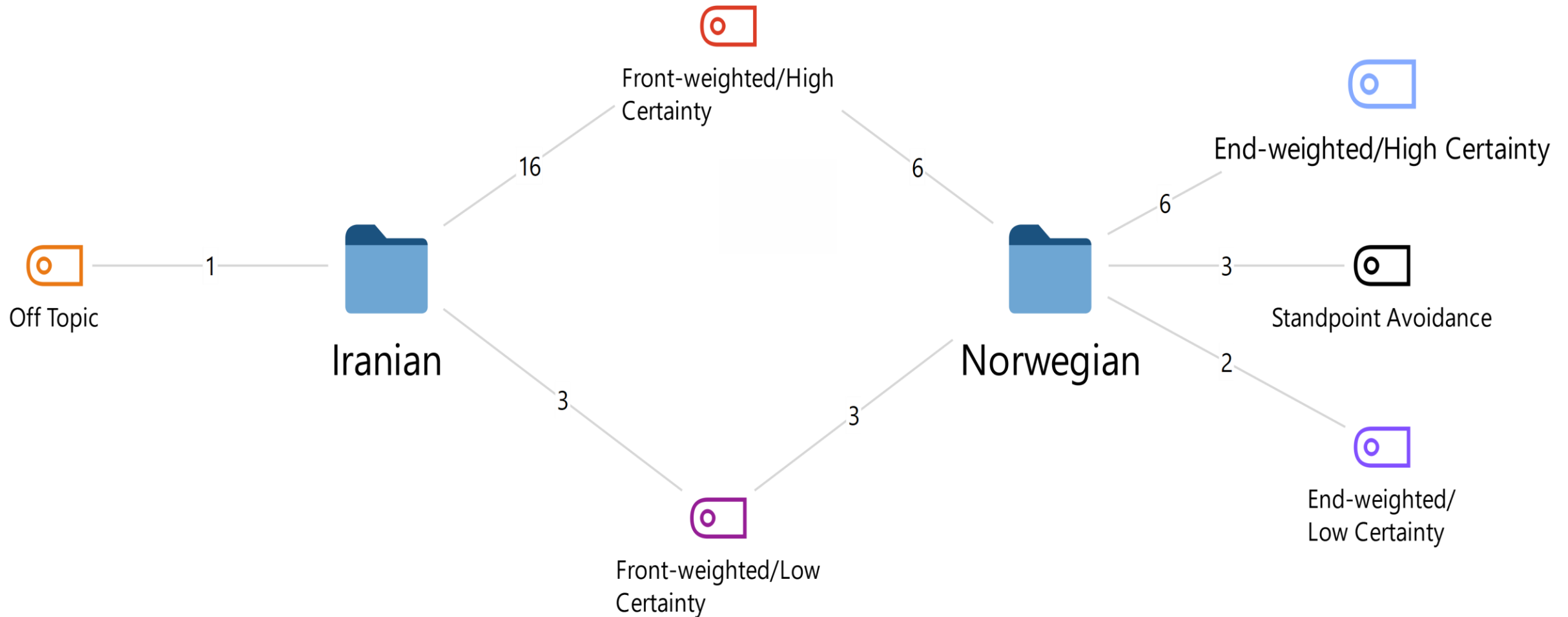
- **Norwegian:**

Topic: The prison system is outdated; no civilized society should punish its criminals. It should rehabilitate them. Do you agree or disagree with the statement above?

My point is: Noone has yet found a proved answer to this question. And I will not dare to suggest a conclusion about what this answer is. I think many answers will be required at the same time. The closest thing I want to come to a conclusion is how to use the answers when they are finded.

(ICLE-NO-UO-0009.1, Pos. 4)

RESULTS: MAIN STANDPOINT AND TEXT ORGANIZATION



RESULTS: MAIN STANDPOINT PRESENTATION

Standpoint presentation	Norwegian	Iranian
Front-weighted	9	19
End-weighted	8	0
Standpoint avoidance	3	0
Off topic	0	1
Total	20	20

Results:

Iranians almost always use the front-weighted structure (95%).

There are more Norwegian than Iranian writers who use the End-weighted text structure and Standpoint avoidance (11 Norwegians vs. 0 Iranians)

Standpoint avoidance does not occur among the Iranians

RESULTS: HIGH/LOW CERTAINTY

Standpoint Presentation	Standpoint presentation	Norwegian	Iranian
High certainty	Front	6	16
	End	6	0
Low certainty	Front	3	3
	End	2	0
Standpoint avoidance		3	0
Off topic		0	1
Total		20	20

Result 1: There are more Iranian than Norwegian writers who present their main standpoint with high certainty (16 Iranian vs. 12 Norwegian)

Result 2: 16 out of 20 (=80%) of the Iranian texts are Front-weighted with high certainty. Only 6 out of 20 (=30%) of the Norwegian texts are of this type.

RESULT: CORRELATION BETWEEN FRONT- /END-WEIGHTED AND CERTAINTY

Text structure	High certainty	Low certainty	Total
Front-weighted	22 (=79%)	6 (= 31%)	28 (100%)
End-weighted	6 (=75%)	2 (=25%)	8 (100%)
Off topic			1
Standpoint avoidance			3
			40

Results:

The texts tend to be with high certainty.

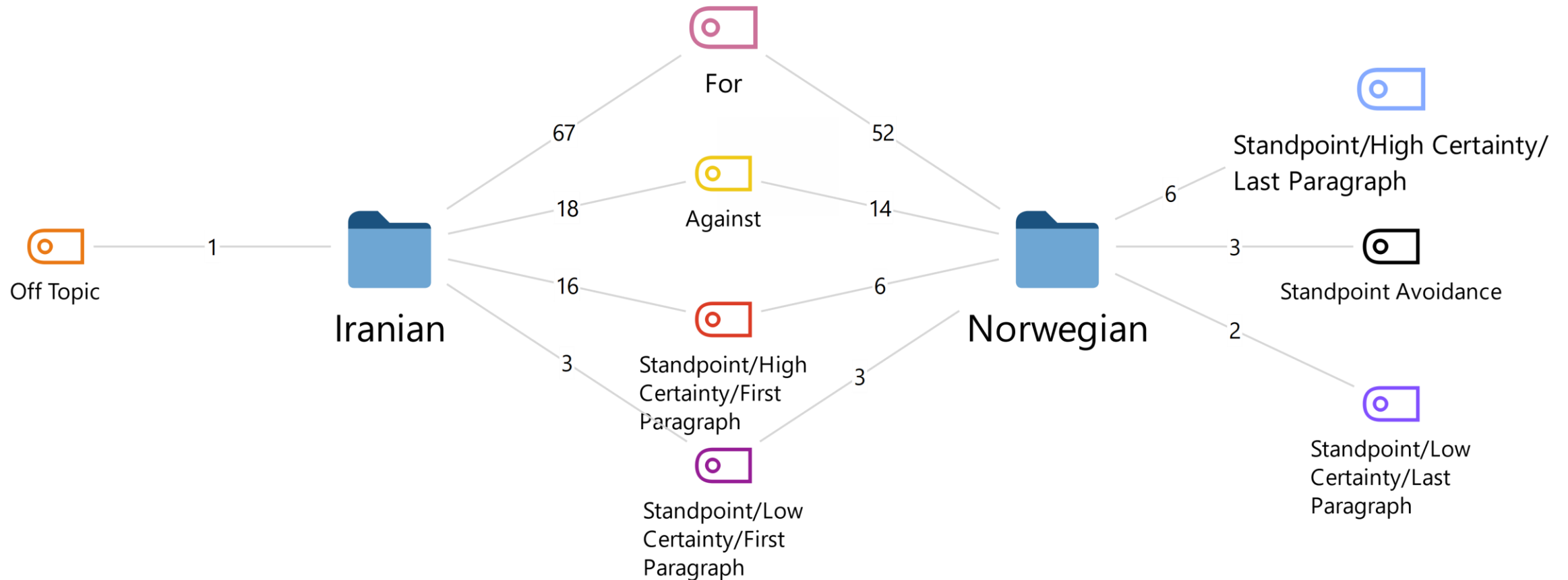
The degree of certainty is not directly linked to being end- or front-weighted.

Research question 2: Arguments and counterarguments

- **Research questions**
 - a) What are the numbers of arguments and counterarguments?
 - b) Do these numbers correlate with the standpoint presentation style?
- **Argument:** data that the writer puts forward in support of his/her *main standpoint* to strengthen it.
- **Counterargument:** a potential disagreement that the writer highlights to indicate that some people may oppose *the main standpoint*.

Cf. 'dialectical routes', Van Eemeren (2021)

RESULTS: THE RELATIVE NUMBER OF ARGUMENTS/COUNTERARGUMENTS



THE RELATIVE NUMBER OF ARGUMENTS/COUNTERARGUMENTS

	ARGUMENTS	COUNTER- ARGUMENTS	Total
IRANIAN	67 (79%)	18 (21%)	85 (100%)
NORWEGIAN	52 (79%)	14 (21%)	66 (100%)

Main finding:
The proportion of Arguments and Counter-arguments is the same for the Iranian and Norwegian writers.

TEXT ORGANIZATION AND ARGUMENTS/COUNTERARGUMENTS

	ARGUMENTS	COUNTER- ARGUMENTS
Front-weighted	96 (83%)	22 (88%)
End-weighted	20 (17%)	3 (12%)
Total	116 (100%)	25 (100%)

Main finding: The frequency of arguments and counterarguments in front-weighted text structure are more for both groups

TEXT ORGANIZATION AND ARGUMENTS/COUNTERARGUMENTS

	ARGUMENTS	COUNTER-ARGUMENTS
High certainty	93 (80%)	22 (88%)
Low certainty	23 (20%)	3 (12%)
Total	116 (100%)	25 (100%)

Main finding: The frequency of arguments and counterarguments in high certainty standpoints are more for both groups

Summary of study

- **Research questions:** Is there a difference between Norwegian and Iranian background crucial for the argumentation style?
 - a) Where is the main standpoint presented (first/last/never)?
 - b) With what degree of certainty is it presented (high/low)?
 - c) What are the numbers of arguments and counterarguments (and their relative proportion)?
 - d) Do these numbers correlate with the standpoint presentation style?

=> Some tendencies in the results suggest that there may be such differences, but this must be compared to other factors.

=> There is a stronger tendency for Iranians to be front-weighted.

=> There is a stronger tendency for Iranians to present the main argument with high certainty.

=> There are no crucial differences between the Iranian and Norwegian writers with respect to the proportion of arguments and counter arguments.

=> There are no crucial differences between the Iranian and Norwegian writers with respect to the use of arguments and counterarguments.

FUTURE AIMS OF MY PH.D. PROJECT

1. Include also American texts (i.e. three groups: Iranian, Norwegian and American writers)
 2. Compare the possible effect of culture to the effect of essay topic (cf. the literature that has shown an effect of discipline)
 3. Investigate the presentational devices (i.e. lexical items) of the three groups more closely (such as hedging/boosting devices and their alternatives)
 4. Investigate the argumentation schemes used by the three groups (reference: Walton et al., 2008 and Van Eemeren (2021))
- => Investigate whether the argumentation style of the three groups are different (cf. van Eemeren (2021))

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