

This evaluative stance is a challenge for many TOK students. Students often get caught in the trap of offering too much description of ideas or examples, and not getting under the ideas and into the analysis of them. Even more difficult is a sustained and explicit commentary on the material. A good analytical essay (generally in the form of a discursive essay) can show all the TOK skills needed to do well, but in the best essays, the student is in full command of the material, using the analysis of the material to make their own comment on the material. In the exhibition you only have about 300 words to move through description and into evaluation. This is the level students should really be aiming for. The examiners are most interested in your commentary on the material; they don't just need the ideas explained to them. They are TOK teachers and already understand it well enough. They want to know your ideas about the material.

■ BUILDING KNOWLEDGE ANALYSES

When evaluating anything in the context of TOK, try to remember that the whole point of the course is to get you thinking about knowledge. So your comment on propaganda, for example, should focus on how the things you claim to know are influenced by the propaganda, not about how you behave or about your decisions. Your 'comment on the material' should be about how you think the event, process or **real-life situation** impacts your knowledge about the world.

The TOK essay

The points above are meant to be general advice for the construction of your ideas, regardless of whether those ideas are presented in the TOK essay or the TOK exhibition. This general advice might be applied to the essay and exhibition equally, but there are some differences that should not be ignored.

This section is about how to apply this advice to the specifics of the TOK essay.

■ The prescribed titles

Because the essay on a prescribed title has been central to the assessment of the TOK course for many years, there are hundreds of past prescribed titles out there and your teachers may have collected some over the years. You will certainly be able to find them on the internet.

Previously, the prescribed titles have taken all sorts of different formats and, in the most recent version of the course, the prescribed titles did not make specific reference to any AOKs at all, often asking students to *choose* which of the AOKs to use in their answers.

In the current course (first being assessed in May 2022), however, the new prescribed titles will:

- be formulated in the form of a knowledge question, or already reference a knowledge issue
- usually reference one or more of the AOKs
- allow some choice of a second AOK, if only one is specified
- perhaps also mention an element of the knowledge framework.

Because the subject guide requires *all* the AOKs to be discussed in the course along with each of the different elements of the knowledge framework, then all the students should be prepared to answer titles on any of the AOKs.

In a few places in this text, I reference past titles, but I have chosen titles that keep largely to the new structure. Please be aware, however, that the new prescribed titles may look slightly different, even if they are essentially the same sorts of things.

■ Deciding what to think

TOK essays are difficult to write. Every year I have students tell me that the TOK is by far the most challenging essay they have had to write, in some ways even more challenging than the extended essay. However, I find that the reason many students find the TOK essay so challenging is because they have not considered it as a two-step process: they have soldiered ahead, churning out words and ideas in an attempt to reach the magical goal of 1600 words. They often find while they write, however, that the issue they are exploring are far more challenging than they thought they were.

They are then faced with a choice:

Do I go back and change my ideas based on my new thinking, or do I carry on towards the finish and make the most of what I have written so far?

Going back is always the best idea because your essay will be far more coherent and directed if you have established what you think *before* you begin presenting your ideas. If you just carry on, the end of the essay will likely not match up with the beginning.

A more structured approach, which divides the thinking up of the ideas from the presenting of them in an essay, is meant to alleviate much of the suffering that comes with this sudden realization that all your ideas have changed and you are half-way through writing! I don't suggest that this will necessarily make the process easier (although I think it does), but it will probably make it more of an enjoyable journey.

IN PRACTICE

For me the idea is simple: first work out what it is that you want to say, then work out how best to say it. In the case of TOK, you must first put in the hard work of crafting your ideas and determining what it is that you think about the knowledge questions in your exhibition, or the issues pertaining to the prescribed title. Work out your answer and the various elements of that answer, then make decisions about what is the best way to present it.

These two phases are equally important, but they are quite different in the types of questions you are answering in them (see 'Target questions', page 74).

That first phase (deciding what to think) will require you to try to articulate ideas, then test them, cross them out, modify them and sometimes start again, until you develop a series of ideas which together provide a clear answer to the prescribed title. During this 'thinking phase', you can write, use sticky notes, mind maps, spider diagrams or anything that helps you to develop your response.

So, how best do you proceed in a way that ends in an essay you can be proud of?

The steps which follow can be used as a guide. However, keep in mind that the steps will likely overlap in places. You might be making choices about the sequencing of ideas while you are simply articulating the key ideas of the essay – this is fine, it is all part of the process. The other key point to remember is that this is time-consuming and so represents the ideal situation. In reality, you will be subject to deadlines for your writing as well as having a whole wealth of other pressures on your time.

In addition to this, you will probably have other homework, other IAs, sports training and fixtures, plays to learn lines for, rehearsals for music events, concerts to go to, movies to see and friends to hang out with. Some of you might take time to sleep as well.

The best advice is to start early, do your best and don't wait until the last minute (but really, you know this already). The prescribed titles come out in September for May examination students and in March for November students: you don't have to wait for your teachers to put a process into place to begin thinking about how you will answer the titles.

I suggest that deciding what you think can be broken down into roughly four steps:

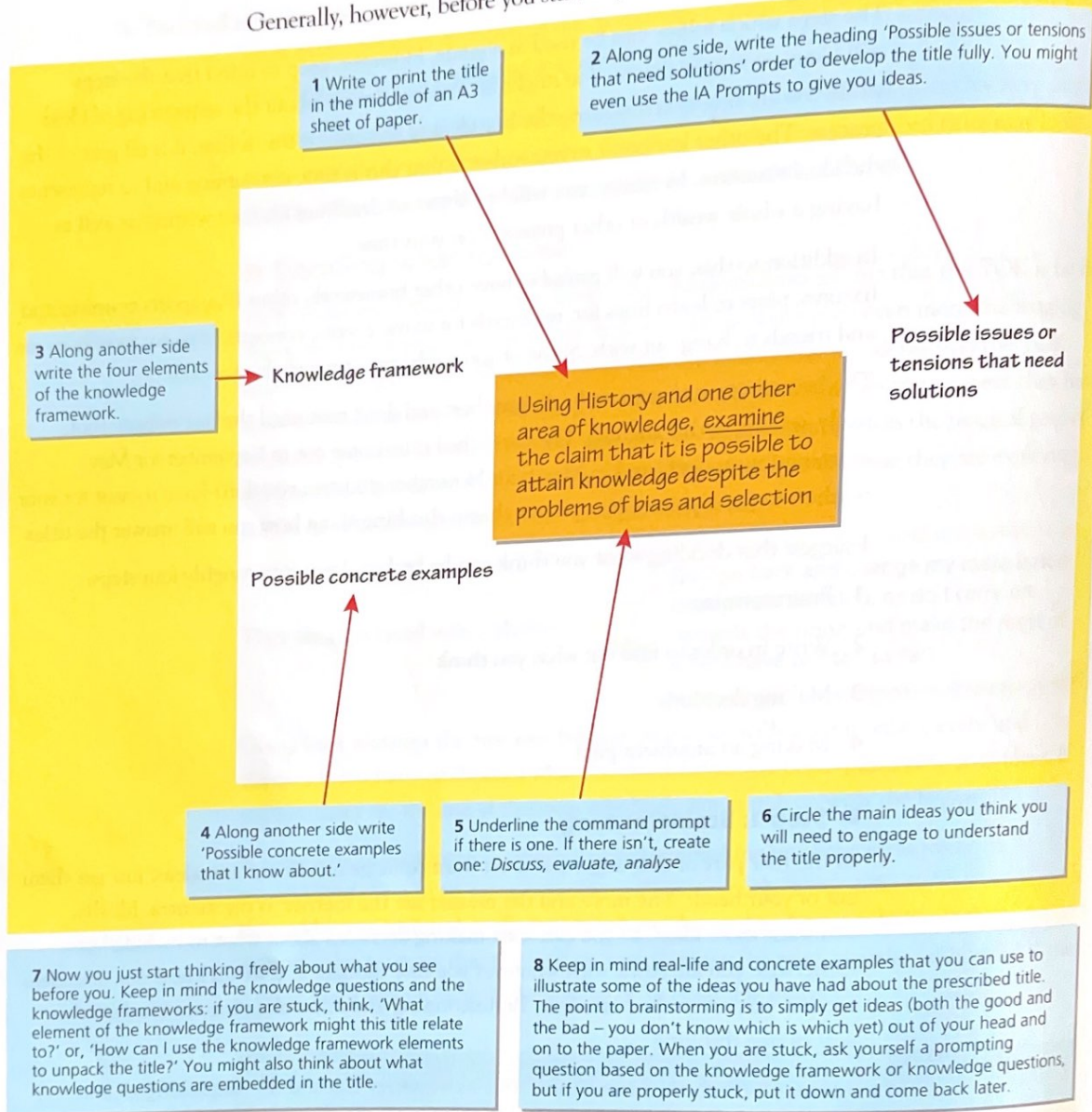
- 1 Brainstorming
- 2 Write in order to find out what you think
- 3 Making decisions
- 4 Making an argument plan

■ Step 1: Brainstorming

In the first part of this stage, you don't want to judge or toss out any ideas, just get them out of your head. 'The more and the messier are the merrier' is my mantra. Ideally, you want more ideas, so you can start making decisions about what to include later. Otherwise you are stuck with whatever you first thought and we all know our first ideas are not very often the best ideas. Brainstorming and mind-mapping are ideal for this sort of free thinking.

I try to think about the prescribed title as a mystery box and the 'unpacking' of it as literally breaking open parts of it and seeing what is there (concepts, AOKs, command prompts, key words, and so on). In some cases, if the prescribed title addresses a certain concept (perhaps one of the 12 core concepts, or some element of the knowledge framework) 'bias' then this gives you the opportunity to apply a whole range of ideas, if relevant. Simply writing a short paragraph about these ideas might be a way to start writing if you are stuck.

Generally, however, before you start any writing, I would suggest the following:



TOK TRAP

There is no reason why, at this stage (and really, at this stage only), you cannot identify ideas in collaboration with a friend – you are only throwing ideas around without any judgment of them. When you start to notice that certain ideas of those you have identified mean that other ideas are not going to be relevant, this means that you have begun to establish a direction, you are now making choices and building your own individual response to the title. This is when

you should *stop collaborating* as you will run the risk of either giving others your ideas or too-heavily drawing on the ideas of others and falling foul of the academic honesty requirements.

The IB has very strict rules about academic dishonesty and if they feel that you have colluded or taken others' ideas as your own, you run the risk of losing your diploma!

TOK TRAP

Even though you might have created your own knowledge questions or used the IA Prompts to unpack the issues contained in the title **you must only answer the title as set**. You should not let the other questions you've developed distract your attention. Use the others as *waypoints* on the way to an answer for the title. If your answer answers any question other than the prescribed title you chose, then you run the risk of getting zero points!

You have finished brainstorming when you start to formulate hypotheses about how you will actually construct a response. At this point you might use different coloured pens and highlighters to identify which ideas you like, which examples you think might be fruitful or which elements of the knowledge framework you would like to focus on. Make sure that you are thinking about genuine TOK ideas about knowledge at this stage too! When considering the ideas you have identified, you must be able to explain clearly and explicitly why that idea is going to help you answer the title. Do not engage with ideas unless they are clear 'stepping-stones' to developing a response to the title.

■ Step 2: Writing to find out what you think

IN PRACTICE**Most important tip ever!**

Back up your material or make sure that *all* your writing is 'in the cloud'.

Many schools provide backup services through the software they use (Google Docs, Google Classroom, OneNote, OneDrive, etc). Computers crash, they get dropped, they run out of battery, they get coffee spilled on them and when that happens, they often lose whatever was being done. Don't be *that* student who loses everything because their computer died – back it up!

Often you can begin the next stage by writing, although not by 'writing the introduction'. Write that last. Here you just want to start developing your ideas using sentences and words. If you don't know what to write initially, don't worry. Try to identify the ideas that you know that you will have to *describe* or discuss no matter what your final evaluation of them will be. Just begin by writing them out.

Consider the recent prescribed title:

Areas of knowledge have methods for testing and supporting knowledge claims. How can we know that these methods themselves are reliable? Develop your answer with reference to two areas of knowledge.

No matter what your evaluation, you would have to discuss and explain the methods involved in knowledge construction in two AOKs. Perhaps you have already decided that you're going to explore history as an AOK, so you might begin by describing what you think of as 'the historical method'. Maybe you don't know what to say *about* it, or where it will go in the final essay, but you know you will have to describe it at some point in the essay, so just start there. The secret, then, is after you have done it, you put it away and come back to it later, and do not think of it as anything like a final product.

ACTIVITY

Look at the prescribed titles from which you must choose. For each, make a list of the ideas that you think you will have to engage with. Before you make your final choice, you might compare your lists and even practise writing a paragraph for some of the key ideas you have identified. Do you feel comfortable writing about those ideas? Do you have things to say about those concepts? If not, then that title might not be for you.

This phase of writing prompts unique questions which are different from the questions you encounter in the 'presenting phase'. In this second phase you will make decisions about the order of the ideas; which ideas will go in which paragraph, and so on.

The following sections offer some advice about how to use these two processes in relation to the essay.

- **Tip 1:** Some word-processing software have what is called 'outline view' which makes developing and sequencing ideas very easy. I use it when I have to produce large and complex pieces of writing, like a textbook.

I use the headings to organize ideas, and the subheadings and 'body text' to begin the process of articulating the ideas. When I am done with one section (or have run out of things to say), I just close it so I cannot see it anymore and move on to work on some other section. Collapsing various levels lets you see the headings at a glance, which then lets you see how the main ideas are fitting together.

As I write in this view, I begin to uncover ideas I didn't know I had, and I can easily move them about. When the time comes for the second half of the process – writing to present the ideas – I can easily switch the view to 'print layout' and voila, much of my essay is written already!

- **Tip 2:** As you identify particular ideas and concepts you will begin finding relationships between them. Here again you should try to write out how you see those relationships working. As you do this you will now start thinking about (or looking for) genuine examples that will be helpful in illustrating your ideas. Rather than worrying about when to present the examples, just practise writing them out – take up as many words as you need to make it a good example.

The best ideas you will have during this stage are the ideas about what sorts of knowledge issues you come across while thinking about the title. Remember not to let these draw you away from staying focused on the prescribed title. One section in your drafting of ideas at this point should be a careful articulation of why the new ideas you have uncovered are relevant to the title: just a sentence or two will suffice.

As you continue this process, you will soon find that you are building a general approach to the title, or a strategy to deal with the ideas and issues contained in the title. If you are lucky, you will have a number of different approaches or ideas to choose from. Work through some of the details for each of the approaches to see which are more fruitful, or which you have the most ideas for. Your challenge in the latter stages of this thinking phase is to make decisions about which ideas you would prefer to explore.

■ Step 3: Making decisions – thinking about what you have written and what you *now* think about the title

Now that you have written a few words, you can start reflecting on just what you have decided about what you think. You can think strategically about this by asking the following questions (but not necessarily in this order):

- Which of your ideas do you actually think are correct? It is far easier to justify a position which you believe to be the correct position.
- Which ideas do you think are best justified? You might find that you are not sure what you think, but that you have a couple of good arguments for one idea or another.
- Which ideas do you think you have enough words to fill an essay with? You don't want to choose a topic then spend a lot of time on it only to find that you really don't have a lot to say about it.
- Which ideas do you think are most surprising or interesting? Often you can capture the imagination (and approval) of the examiners if you can develop an idea that challenges the status quo or explores something in a unique and surprising way.
- Which of your ideas are a genuine response to the prescribed title as set? Scratch out the ideas that are tangents or that take you further away from the title. You must make sure that *all* of your ideas are relevant to the prescribed title. I always have a copy of the main essay title to hand when working on essays – keep going back to the title and ask: 'Is what I'm writing directly relevant to a response to that title?'

TOK TRAP

While you are producing ideas in this way, and at this stage, you must not think of the words you are writing as the final words, in their final form. Once you have decided on your approach, you might wish to use much of what you have written but you will

still have to work through the ideas and develop your writing.

You will have to add signposts linking the sections together and introductory and concluding passages to help elucidate the points you are trying to make.

■ Step 4: Making an argument plan

The final outcome of this process should be a clear understanding of what your response to the prescribed title is going to be. After you have made your decisions about which of your ideas you are going to develop and which you think best answer the title, you should try to organize them into an argument.

One way of capturing this argument is with an 'argument plan'. *This is not an essay plan.* The essay plan will be an outline of the main ideas in their proper order; in other words, the culmination of the second stage of the process. We are still in the first stage.

- A good argument will also have a number of 'premises' which give weight to the thesis and justify it. You also need to be able to state your premises in a few brief sentences. When you write them out separately, and in order, do they amount to a clear answer to the title?
- Each premise will itself need justification. Solid examples are crucial for this element; don't make examples up— find real and concrete examples from the real world. Real examples are best when trying to illustrate and justify the premises.
- A good argument will also be aware of what someone who disagrees with the thesis or the premises would say. Can you articulate the position of someone who disagrees? What would they say in response to you? What examples would they use as evidence against you? Try to make these counter-arguments as strong as possible or else you might be committing 'the straw man fallacy'.
- A good argument will also reply to the counter-arguments. It shows good thinking skills to be aware of how people might disagree with you, but even better thinking to then reply to those counter-claims and show why, despite these worries, your position is still better.

In summary, any good argument will clearly state the thesis being supported, make explicit the premises and evidence for that thesis, show what counter or alternative positions are available, and why you still hold to your own thesis. If you can do this, you have developed a very strong argument.

■ Avoid dictionary definitions

Many of the TOK essays I read while examining make a point of taking the time (and spending the words) to offer an explicit definition of key words in the title. Often this is prefaced 'The Oxford English Dictionary defines X as ...'. To me, this is a clear case of mixing up 'writing to think' with 'writing to present'. The student has been told that 'you should define key words', and while this is probably true, it is not true that the definition actually has to be in the essay! You might not need to include it.

Reasons to include a definition in a TOK essay include:

- if the word is so uncommon or technical to an AOK that it is unlikely the examiner will know it
- if a proper technical definition is required
- if the common-place definition from the dictionary will actually be tested or challenged.

TOK is a course that should create a sceptical approach to dictionaries and their definitions in the first place – as you will have learned from TOK, the meaning of the words we use are malleable and historically contextualized: in other words, the definition of a word will change over time. While dictionaries are useful to identify how words are used at the moment, they are not the sorts of things which necessarily dictate the meaning of those words. We decide how words are used when we use them, and dictionaries just capture this common usage of the moment. The word 'gay' is a classic example: once meaning happy or joyful, it has come to be used as synonymous with homosexual.

Dictionary definitions
are almost never
effective in TOK
essays



Therefore, by offering dictionary definitions and then doing nothing with them suggests that you are accepting dictionaries as genuine authorities of the meanings of words, and this might make a TOK examiner sceptical: have you really understood the nature of language in the construction of knowledge if you uncritically accept that dictionaries are somehow 'true'?

So, by all means, keep the dictionary close to hand when working on your TOK assessments; they might be very helpful as you think through the various approaches you can take, but it is likely the examiner doesn't need you to write out a definition for them. You might include the dictionary definition if you are making a point about the limits of dictionaries as authorities when it comes to how words are used, but all too often students randomly define 'key words' in the title then completely ignore those definitions or never use them again.

■ Types of essay

There are two main types of TOK essay:

- Discursive: the essay that seeks to discuss.
- Persuasive: the essay that seeks to persuade.

Both can be successful responses to the TOK prescribed titles. In many cases, the prescribed title in fact seems to lean towards the discursive approach, but even in those cases students can choose to write in either style.

■ Discursive essays

Essays which try to 'discuss' are said to be discursive. This means that their primary objective is to outline and explain any number of primary issues having to do with a topic. Success in a discursive essay requires you to identify key issues, then explain them and analyse them fully. At the end of reading a discursive essay, your reader should have a good sense of the importance and significance of the key elements in the area you are focusing on.

Don't, however, underestimate the critical nature of 'discuss' in the TOK prescribed titles. It is not the same type of 'discuss' as 'Let's meet up for coffee and discuss that movie' – this sense of 'discuss' means merely the idea of talking around an issue, and there is very little at stake, or not much by way of significance, in a discussion of this type.

The 'discuss' in the prescribed titles are more like an interrogation than a friendly chat



When prescribed titles use the command word 'discuss' you should understand it more like when your parents say, 'We need to discuss your behaviour last weekend', or your school principal calls you into their office saying, 'We need to discuss your academic record'. Here 'discuss' signifies that something is at stake and that it needs to be sorted out. You might think of it as a *tension* in the title or a challenge.

Your job in a *discursive* essay is to identify that issue and explore it with an eye to illuminating or clarifying the significant issues and seeking a position on those issues. After reading a good discursive essay, your examiner should clearly understand not just what the issues might be, but also what you think the important issues are, what questions and problems exist, why those issues are significant and possibly how those issues can be resolved.

ACTIVITY

Choose past prescribed titles that ask you to 'discuss'. First, make a list of ideas or content that you think you need to discuss (in the way you might 'discuss' a movie). Next, make a list of *issues* (or *tensions*) that need sorting out relating to that content. If you write an essay on the title, it should be on these *issues*.

Things to consider in a discursive essay:

- **Identify key issues:** The key to success in this first element is to make good choices. The choice of ideas you wish to 'discuss' is an important decision and one which will tell the examiner the level of sophistication with which you are approaching the title. For example, a recent title asked students to explore the extent to which the knower's perspective was *essential* to the pursuit of knowledge in relation to an AOK. One of the

major pitfalls of this title was that students elected to focus on the notion of how the knower's perspective impacted on the pursuit of knowledge without investigating why that was (or was not) *essential*. So, an essay which discussed the impact of the knower's perspective certainly would not have been wrong, but it would not have discussed all the important elements.

- **Explain and analyse these issues:** The success of a discursive essay then builds on a good choice of what issue gets discussed. The major pitfall in this area is that the explanation and analysis of the material ends up being disjointed, meaning that the various issues identified, explained and analysed appear as if they have little relation to each other. In other words, the essay appears to be more of a 'stream of consciousness' than a genuine discussion.

When students write 'Another issue is ...' or, 'This links up to what I have said before in that ...' examiners wonder just what that link is meant to be, or just how the student thinks the next issue is related to those that came before it. 'Moreover' and 'furthermore' are often also simply suggesting that another vaguely related idea is coming, but don't themselves explain what the relationship is between the ideas.

TOK TRAP

Essays need signposts: connective phrases which tell the reader how each paragraph relates to the main context of the essay and the specific ideas that surround it. You want to choose connective phrases that actually tell your reader what the connections are. Phrases like 'Another point is ...' just tells the examiner that you are making a list, and not explaining how the ideas relate.

Look at the following 'signposts' and rate them according to how much they actually tell the reader about how the ideas relate to one another:

- 'Moreover ...'
- 'A counter-claim would be ...'
- 'This leads on to ...'
- 'But things are more complicated than this ...'
- 'Applying this idea to the following situation, however ...'
- 'One implication of this idea is ...'
- 'However, it is not clear that this is entirely true ...'
- 'While there may be strengths to this position, further analysis indicates that ...'
- 'Another point is ...'
- 'In contrast to this point ...'

- **Develop a common theme:** The point then, is that even in a discursive essay there must be a common thread to the essay which creates clear links between ideas.

I use a variety of metaphors to illustrate this point. I ask students, 'What is the main issue on which you will hang your various ideas, like coat hangers hanging on a clothes rail?' or, 'What is the trunk from which your ideas will grow, like branches from a tree?' or, 'What is the main idea that your ideas will contribute to, like streams feeding into a larger river?'

This thread that your ideas are feeding into or hanging from is the main issue I mentioned earlier when defining the various types of 'discuss'. It is the behaviour at the weekend or the academic record that will serve to guide and focus the rest of the discussion.

As a non-TOK example, were you to discuss the differences between two universities, you wouldn't just list a whole series of facts about each. You would identify key issues

which would act as the comparative context. You might compare admission rates or course choices or financial aid; these would be the clothes rails off which you could hang the individual points. Having a common thread like this *creates* the comparison – otherwise they are just random facts sitting next to one another. In the context of TOK, this common thread will likely be explicitly stated by the title, or closely related to it. Make sure it is clear and make sure it is clearly knowledge-focused.

Also make sure your examiner knows what that main point is. This really should be offered in the introductory paragraph. Having this main context tells them that you have chosen consciously the ideas you are discussing – you are not simply writing ideas down as they pop into your head: you know how they relate to one another and how, together, they create a single sophisticated discussion of the topic at hand.

The explanation and analysis of your essay will then build on common ideas being discussed throughout, thereby giving the essay a coherent and unified vision. Explanation and analysis go far beyond description, and knowing why you are introducing an idea into the discussion helps you extend beyond simple description. Similarly, you might have all sorts of really good ideas, but without a clear structure, they will just rattle around like ping pong balls dropped on the floor. Examiners call these ‘stream of consciousness’ essays and can spot them a mile away.

ACTIVITY

Choose either past titles, or the prescribed titles you will be using and ‘discuss’ them with your group as part of the brainstorming step. See if you can identify the main idea or ideas that the prescribed title is trying to get at. There might be more than one. If you were to write a full essay, you might use that main idea/problem/issue to create the context in which the rest of your ideas would fit and be related to one another.

■ Persuasive essays

A persuasive essay is an essay which seeks to convince or persuade its reader of something. It will make a point and try to offer reasons to believe it: it puts forward an argument. And by argument I don’t mean ‘two conflicting viewpoints’. In the words of Monty Python’s famous ‘Argument Clinic’ sketch, an argument is ‘an intellectual process’ or ‘a connected series of statements intended to establish a definite proposition’ (John Cleese and Graham Chapman, 1972). It is *not* simply a series of contradicting statements.

A genuine ‘argument’ seeks to establish the truth of some position or some claim, which is generally called the thesis, or the conclusion. I prefer ‘thesis’ over ‘conclusion’ as students often confuse the ‘conclusion’ (that which an argument is seeking to establish) with ‘the concluding paragraph’ (the final paragraph of the essay). In terms of the TOK essay, if you are writing a persuasive essay, you want to seek to establish a thesis which is a direct response to the prescribed title. You should be able to say the prescribed title out loud, then say your thesis and the two together should make perfect sense (though, of course, your thesis will need support!)



ACTIVITY

For a good example of what an argument is not, use the QR code to view the Monty Python ‘Argument Clinic’ sketch online. Try to identify exactly what the customer says an argument *is* and what he says it *is not*.

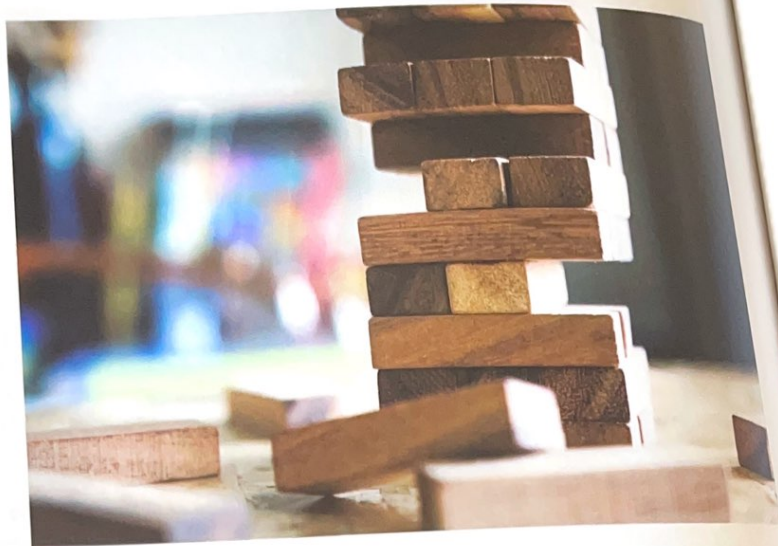
ACTIVITY

These thesis statements could be thought of as direct responses to the various prescribed titles. Can you match the title to the thesis? (Some of these titles have been amended slightly to fit with the new style of questions.)

Prescribed title	Thesis statement
A 'There is no such thing as a neutral question.' Evaluate this statement with reference to two areas of knowledge. (May 2015)	1 The nature of the evidence and the role of testability of claims means that contrasting views have different effects on the overall reliability of the knowledge produced in the AOKs.
B 'Knowledge is nothing more than the systematic organization of facts.' Discuss this statement in relation to two areas of knowledge. (May 2014)	2 While both the sciences and the arts might tell us about our own nature, they use significantly different concepts and methods to do so. Ultimately, the knowledge gained in the arts is far more significant.
C In what ways may disagreement aid the pursuit of knowledge in the natural and human sciences? (May 2013)	3 While questions in mathematics often rely on certain axiomatic assumptions, they don't necessarily make that knowledge less reliable. How questions are posed in the human sciences, however, do directly relate to the validity of the knowledge gained from the answers.
D 'Knowledge gives us a sense of who we are.' To what extent is this true in the human sciences and one other area of knowledge? (November 2013)	4 No knowledge is genuinely useful unless it is aimed at solving real-world problems.
E 'Without the group to verify it, knowledge is not possible.' Discuss with reference to two areas of knowledge. (November 2015)	5 In all forms of knowledge, the knowledge of the community plays an important role, particularly in the methods and concepts used. However, that role is significantly different in measuring the reliability and importance of that knowledge for the individual.
F 'Some areas of knowledge seek to describe the world, whereas others seek to transform it.' (November 2014)	6 The concept of 'fact' varies among AOKs, which suggests that the methods and scopes of the AOK impose a structure on the raw material of knowledge which may or may not be the way the world really is.

How do you build support for your thesis? In an argument, there needs to be a collection of claims, which, if true, will make your thesis more convincing. These are called 'premises'. The premises should be related to one another and build on one another in a way that leads naturally to the conclusion.

Arguments are made up of *premises* which work together to give strength to the overall thesis. If some premises are weak, the argument will collapse



Each premise will need its own support, and this is where you get into the detailed explanation of real, concrete examples and their analysis, showing both that you understand the nature of the TOK course and that you can create a 'clear, coherent and critical exploration' of the title. Your essay might have all the structure and clearly identified theses in the world, but if you don't offer strong evidence for the premises, the arguments amount to nothing. Many students offer clear, convincing, but far too abstract points without showing how these ideas work in reality or testing them through appeal to illustrative examples. This suggests that the students are struggling to find real-world application of the concepts of the title, something the examiners want to see. These sorts of mistakes will weaken the argument and lower the examiner's marks.

There is no requirement that your reader *must* agree with you after reading the essay, but your handling should be *convincing*, meaning an argument which is well justified and has clear evidence to support it.

The thing to remember, however, is that you might not know your thesis when you begin the process. Which is why, if you are hoping to create a well-polished essay, you should not assume that your first attempt at writing will be the final product. If you have broken your process into the two stages I am suggesting, then this won't be a problem. Whatever work it takes to identify the thesis and how to support it is the first stage, the second stage, then, is how to present it.

The best essays are generally those which have a clear and sustained *purpose* to them; in other words, the essay is very clearly aiming at some goal, not just randomly explaining or discussing ideas. These can be either discursive or persuasive. However, in my experience, if a student is opting for the discursive essay, they will too often fall into the trap of not weaving a coherent narrative out of the various discussion points: the essay ends up simply being a list of barely connected ideas. For this reason, I encourage my students to aim for persuasive essays because doing so means they will (hopefully) keep that main thesis in mind as they write, and each section of the essay will be directly linked.

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Even if the essay is a discussion, students can take the main comparative point that I suggested earlier as being essential to a discursive essay, and turn that into the thesis of a persuasive essay. Alternatively, the main thesis might be descriptive, simply identifying the main comparative claim that is going to serve as the organizing feature of the essay. For example, 'The essay title raises challenging questions having to do with reliability in the science, and I will be exploring the variety of issues pertaining to this' would serve as a thesis of sorts for a discursive essay.

■ What makes a good essay?

■ What to put in the introductory paragraph

Students are often trained to include certain elements in an introductory paragraph: the thesis, some key definitions and a general idea of how the essay will unfold. This is good advice.

Remember, as a rule of thumb, the introduction should serve the same function as a movie trailer: it gives you a hint of the main characters, some indication of the central dilemma and maybe an explosion or two to catch your interest. In your TOK essay introduction, instead of explosions, make sure you indicate what you are taking to be the main issues contained in the title and indicate clearly the approach you are going to take in answering those issues. *You are not writing a mystery novel*, so don't save all the exciting twists for the end: tell your reader what you are planning to say, what you are going to conclude and give some indication of how you are planning to get there.

The introduction should be the last section you finalize before you submit the essay to your teacher. Go ahead and write one to begin with, as this will help you keep on track, but always go back and edit it to make sure it reflects what you actually ended up saying. I have read many essays with really interesting and intriguing introductions which bear no relation to what the student actually ends up writing. The introduction must introduce what you have actually written, not what you had hoped to write.

■ What to include in the concluding paragraph

The assessment criteria expect you to identify and consider the implications of your argument. This is probably done later in the essay since you will need to outline what the argument is before you consider its implications. It is best to not put this in the *final* essay however, since you want to be developing and explaining these implications. Implications are discussed below.

The final conclusion must relate to what you have *actually* written. This means that the introduction and the conclusion should be handled in direct relation to one another. You might read them both together to make sure that they align in terms of their main themes and style.

The concluding paragraph should remind the reader of what you have just argued or discussed but then also indicate (if you have not done so already) what subsequent questions might arise or what unanswered issues might still be pending. This will demonstrate to the examiner that you have something to say about how the ideas you have presented will fit into a wider context, both of which will help show 'critical exploration' and give the examiner more reasons to push your grade into the higher levels.

Don't try to craft your concluding paragraph into some grand summation or spend too many words on it. Your main effort should be spent in the body of the essay. The key is to remind the reader of the main purpose of the essay and wrap up the ideas neatly.

A good introductory paragraph will likely include ...	A good concluding paragraph will likely include ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An indication of why the title is important (a motive for the title). <input type="checkbox"/> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A summary of the main points and the thesis. <input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An indication of how the writer is interpreting the title. <input type="checkbox"/> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some indication of why the analysis you have offered is <i>important</i> to the title (if you have not done so in the body). <input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The primary thesis or point of discussion which will be the essay's outcome. <input type="checkbox"/> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some indication (when appropriate) of unanswered questions, or where the argument might go from here. <input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A <i>brief</i> summary of main reasons to accept the final outcome (a <i>brief</i> summary of your premises or main premise). <input type="checkbox"/> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only things directly relevant to what you have actually written. <input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An indication of how the essay will go about answering the title. <input type="checkbox"/> 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only things directly relevant to what you have actually written in the body of the essay. <input type="checkbox"/> 	

■ Use of counter-arguments to support your own

A well-argued or 'convincing' position is one that takes into consideration alternate positions. Taking a position on an issue means *making choices*, and the argument is an attempt to justify one position over another.

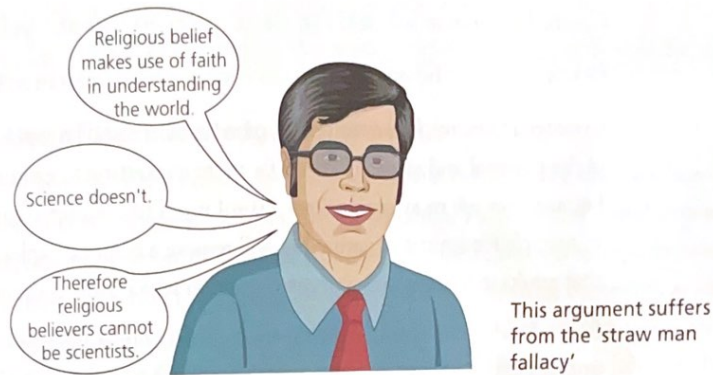
To strengthen your own position, you can *indicate what other options were available to you and why you didn't choose them*. This shows your examiner both that you understand other positions and that you understand your own position's strengths over those other positions. One way of exploring these counter-claims is by asking, 'If someone disagreed with me, what would they say?'

There are two important points regarding the effective use of counter-arguments to strengthen your own position:

- 1 You must offer the counter-argument in the strongest light possible. To do otherwise is to commit the 'straw man fallacy' where you offer a weak and obviously false position and say that your position is better.

Suppose, for example, you are arguing that knowledge about the origins of the universe are best explained using something like the scientific method. If you offer a counter-

argument by saying that 'religious people never believe this', then suggest that this is the case because they *only* use religious scriptures to tell them about the physical origins of the universe, then you are not offering the strongest position because it is simply not true. There are a huge variety of religious perspectives on the origins of the universe and many of them are perfectly happy with the explanations provided by the scientific method. If you characterize the religious perspective in this weak light, the examiner will know immediately that you are not actually strengthening your own argument and will start thinking that your own understanding of the key issues and your abilities to develop a good argument around them are seriously flawed.



- 2 Once you have developed a strong version of a position counter to your own, you should *engage* with it. You don't want the counter-position to be left unchallenged.

If you have a choice between, say, a Keynesian approach to economics and a neoclassical approach, and you choose the neoclassical approach, then you should explain why you have *not* chosen the Keynesian. Yes, you get praise from the examiner for pointing out that there are alternatives, but you will get *more* praise (and more points) for genuine *critical evaluation* of that alternative.

This is precisely why identifying strengths and weaknesses of a position is not genuine evaluation. Describing a position might include describing strengths and weaknesses of it: 'here are two perspectives on this view'. Genuine evaluation, however, would say, 'This is an alternative position to mine that I might have chosen, and it is a position which offers good reasons for believing in it, but I'm sticking with my position because mine is better for the following reasons.' An examiner might not ultimately agree with you in this choice, but explaining why you like your position and why you think it is better than others is good evaluation and adds to your argument's convincingness.

This is really the point at which analysis becomes evaluation. Every position has strengths and weaknesses, and pointing them out and discussing them is good analysis. But once you engage with those strengths and weaknesses and use them to explore your own position, or to explain why the strengths of the counter-position still are not enough to make you change your mind, this is when your analysis becomes evaluation.

These counter-positions can be presented one by one, in a point-counter-point process, or you can present the counter-argument in its own section. The danger with the first method is that the essay tends to read like a tennis match. With all the positions being swatted back and forth, it can become a challenge for the student to maintain a clear

narrative throughout the essay. The second method, however, requires a sophisticated understanding of the main point and means that the counter-position has to be a counter to this main position: 'Overall my position is this ...', so a counter-position also would be a larger, more general counter-claim and this can be a challenge to students.

■ Counter-claim vs counter-argument

Whatever method you choose, it is worth keeping in mind the difference between 'counter-claims' and 'counter-arguments'. Counter-claims are individual claims that challenge the claims you are making. An example would be:

Claim: The human sciences can create questions that are neutral.

Counter-claim: The human sciences cannot create questions that are neutral.

Counter-arguments, however, are far more complex and require a much better understanding of the material and ideas. They are far more interesting to examiners as well, precisely because they use more sophisticated thinking. The counter-argument will not be formulated in a simple for/against structure but will require a genuine exploration of an issue in a way that results in a final, well-supported position which runs counter to your primary position.

So, to develop the counter-claims above, the counter-argument would require a fuller analysis of the nature of the human sciences; the methods they use, their objects and aims. Proper handling of a counter-argument, therefore, might require a separate section of the essay and will need to be properly crafted and understood prior to committing it finally to paper. These sorts of responses where the counter-argument is presented convincingly and is replied to well tend to be the types of things that the best essays can do well.

■ General ideas and suggestions for the essay

When things go well for students in relation to their TOK essays they generally go well in similar directions. While the individual student's own ideas and unique perspectives count for a lot, there are a number of things that good essays have in common. I would recommend reading the 'TOK subject reports' available from your teachers as a source of ideas and suggestions for what to do and what to avoid. These reports are written after the examinations and they are the examiners' opportunity to feed back their thoughts to the TOK world. They are an excellent source of information. What follows is partly a summary of suggestions often found in the reports.

■ Use of AOKs

No TOK essay is complete without the explicit use of AOKs. The prescribed titles will require you to discuss particular AOKs, sometimes with choices about which others you use. 'Knowledge' of the community as an abstract concept is simply too broad to meaningfully discuss without it being contextualized, so the use of AOKs in your discussion will create a context for your ideas and provide a helpful framework for your discussion.

You might say, for example, that 'your own individual knowledge is essential to the construction of the knowledge of the community' (similar to one of the May 2016 titles). This sounds plausible, but how essential the idea of personal knowledge is might depend in quite a significant way on the AOK you are exploring. For example, you might want to argue that your own personal knowledge in religious knowledge systems matters far less than

ever, requires a sophisticated inter-position has to be a counter-argument. A counter-position also would be a challenge to students.

and the difference between individual claims that can be:

be neutral.

positions that are neutral.

require a much better understanding of the knowledge framework as well, precisely because a counter-argument will not be formulated as an exploration of an issue in a way that is counter to your primary position.

A counter-argument would require a fuller understanding of the knowledge frameworks they use, their objects and aims. You should require a separate section of the essay to deal with it prior to committing it finally to the examiner. The argument is presented convincingly and the best essays can do well.

Writing an essay

TOK essays they generally go well. You should have many ideas and unique perspectives. TOK essays have in common. I would like to hear from your teachers as a source of feedback. These reports are written after you have had the opportunity to feed back their thoughts and observations. What follows is partly a

examples. TOKs. The prescribed titles will give you choices about which others you use. Some are simply too broad to meaningfully discuss. TOKs in your discussion will create a challenge for your discussion.

Knowledge is essential to the development of a particular area (similar to one of the May 2016 titles). Personal knowledge is might depend on the context. For example, you might want to argue that knowledge systems matters far less than

in the arts, or indeed vice versa. Whatever you decide to argue, the point is that treating 'knowledge' as if it were a thing all on its own is a mistake. You want to be thinking explicitly in terms of 'mathematical knowledge', 'historical knowledge' or 'scientific knowledge'.

ACTIVITY

For any TOK essay that you are writing, identify when you make a claim about knowledge and see if you are making a *general* claim (something that could be translated as 'all knowledge is ...') or making a contextualized knowledge claim ('knowledge in *this* area of knowledge is like this ...'). You should be contextualizing your knowledge claims more often than not. For any general knowledge claim, ask yourself:

- Is this actually true about all types of knowledge?
- Can I show better thinking skills by exploring this claim in the context of a particular AOK?

■ Use of the knowledge framework

The elements of the knowledge framework are a valuable tool when it comes to making sense of how knowledge works within a particular AOK and are useful in developing comparisons between AOKs. Many of the prescribed titles will ask you to develop a response in relation to a particular element of the knowledge framework as well as an AOK. Even when only one is mentioned, however, don't think that you cannot draw on other elements of the framework as well. None of them operate in isolation. For instance, the scope of the natural sciences has to do with describing the natural world around us, so the *methods* have to be appropriate for that task: the focus on *observation* and *experiment* in the 'scientific method' makes perfect sense.

You might, as another example, be exploring the objectivity of mathematical and scientific knowledge. Using the knowledge framework elements of scope and methods and tools will give you the opportunity to ask different sorts of questions and uncover different answers. For example, you might explore how the scientific method is an attempt to build an objective stance in the sciences, whereas the objectivity of pure mathematics might come more from its scope as a discipline about universal rational principles. Saying, 'Mathematics and sciences are objective' is true on a superficial and far too general level, but you can use the knowledge frameworks to explore much more sophisticated ideas and approaches.

■ Good examples and their proper analysis

Examples are a crucial element to a good TOK analysis. They help *illustrate* the points you are trying to make and have the overall effect of creating stronger and more convincing evaluations. Examples, properly analysed, are an essential aspect of the assessment criteria and will help convince your examiner to raise your mark into the higher levels.

TOK TRAP

Many students offer examples when trying to *explain* a point. They might want to say, for instance, that in the natural sciences, experimentation is essential to a well-justified scientific claim. They then might offer an example of an experiment, perhaps Young's double-slit experiment to test whether light was a wave or a particle. Offering only this example, however, is not an explanation of the point being made!

Examples are opportunities to *illustrate* a point, but they are not, by themselves, *explanations* of a point. Every example needs to be explained in terms of the point being made: 'Why does Young's double-slit experiment show that experimentation is essential to a well-justified claim?'

Examples which are 'too easy' or 'too common' or those which are not well-analysed demonstrate very little analytical skill, and examiners see the same examples used again and again. The reason students (and their teachers) are using them is because they, in fact, are good examples for the TOK points they are trying to make, but the problem comes when they don't use them properly in the essay as a support for a larger claim about knowledge. Often students use certain examples as shorthand for larger points. Rather than offering a proper analysis, they will just throw out a reference to something and hope that the examiner understands the allusion and makes the links for themselves.

■ Proper use of examples

What does it mean to use an example well? When students use examples well:

- **There is a very clear knowledge claim that the example is meant to illustrate.** Examples are only examples if they illustrate some abstract point – in this case the point needs to be *about knowledge*. The example is both to *illustrate* the claim and also to *offer support* for the claim (this is why it needs to be real and not made up).
- **The examples are well explained.** This means taking the time to explain the details of the example, but not spending too much time. It is not necessary to detail every small element of the situation or example. The only parts that need detail are the parts that are needed to help make the point about knowledge that you are working to support.
- **The examples use genuine events or concrete things in the world and are not speculative or hypothetical.** The problem with made-up examples is that they are generally made up in such a way to support whatever point the writer is making. No one ever makes up an example which runs counter to their point.

The most common examples of this are when students conjure up some knower from a culture about which they know very little and claim that *that knower would say* this or that or *would* have an entirely different perspective on some point about knowledge. This is generally pure speculation, no matter how plausible-sounding. The go-to favourite is some knower with a different perspective on history: 'If someone from <some other culture> wrote a history about <some event> they would have an entirely different perspective.'

While this sounds plausible (and indeed, might even be true to an extent) it does not constitute genuine evidence: *to be evidence, a claim has to be genuine*, otherwise it only uncovers intuitions and guesses. A far more effective approach would be to actually find two accounts of a historical event and explore how the approaches are related to that historian's culture.

- **The example is well linked to the TOK point.** Examples work best when it is clear why the writer thinks that it is an example of the point. In other words, the student has offered a clear answer to the question, 'Why is this an example?'

A student might claim that paradigms shift in the natural sciences, then add: 'For example, Einstein.' Examiners are all experienced TOK teachers and will certainly understand what the student is alluding to, but the idea is for the *student to do the work*, not the examiner. We know why Einstein offers a plausible example, but do you? A better approach would be to explain the notion of paradigm shifts within the context of a sophisticated explanation of how new evidence and mathematical

modelling was making it difficult to use traditional Newtonian physics to explain new phenomena.

- **The examples are not repetitive.** Too often the same abstract point (see previous page) is given too many examples. It is a waste of words and time to over-illustrate a point, and if you want to use more than one example for any point, you might want to vary your examples so that you are highlighting a different aspect of the same knowledge claim. If you don't need more than one example, don't waste your time adding multiples.

ACTIVITY

Before you submit your essay to your teacher, go through a printed version of it and use a highlighter to indicate all the examples you use and analyse them along the following lines:

- Are there enough of them? Are there too many of them?
- Are you clear what general point about knowledge you are trying to make?
- Is the example a real-life concrete event in the world?
- Is the example speculative or hypothetical?
- Have you described it well?
- Have you then explained why you think it is an example of the point about knowledge you are trying to make?
- Are you using too many examples for the same point?

■ An analysis of common examples

There are a number of common examples that are often very poorly used in essays. Sometimes they are appropriate and well-used, but too often it is the opposite. I offer a quick discussion of three favourites below, both to suggest that you might do well to avoid them altogether and to give you a sense of how one might meaningfully use them.

IN PRACTICE – BOX 1

Galileo and the Church

It is certainly true that there was some tension between Galileo's claim that the Sun stood at the centre of the solar system and the Church's official stance that it was the Earth at the centre of the universe. In reality, however, the main battle lines are more blurred. Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958) points out that the theoretical belief of heliocentrism was not new to the Church, which was happy to accept different interpretations of the cosmos: there were many of them at the time. According to Arendt, it was the empirical methods that Galileo proposed (that is, using the newly developed telescope) to find out which theories were real that was the larger threat, as this promoted sense perception as the primary authority in the creation of knowledge.

Whatever the case, the story is far more complicated than that of an authoritarian and conservative Church versus a radical free thinker. 'The Galileo Affair' is an excellent vehicle through which to explore the flourishing use of empirical observation in science, and the role of tradition, culture and technology in the construction of knowledge. But, if you are tempted to simply mention it in support of a claim such as, 'Science and faith are in conflict', then you are mistaken. First, it is simply too broad to be correct, and second, you are making far too naive an assumption – neither one of which will convince an examiner that you are doing TOK well.

For further discussion, use the QR code.



IN PRACTICE – BOX 2

People used to believe the Earth was flat

This is the go-to example for a number of plausible TOK points, ranging from the ways our scientific understanding of the world evolves over time, to the role of sense perception in our knowledge. The basic premise, however, that people actually did think the Earth was flat is, again, too broadly stated to have genuine critical bite.

As a matter of fact, most educated people have accepted a spherical Earth since Eratosthenes of Cyrene measured it in the third century BCE, though Plato taught this in his *Phaedo* a hundred or so years earlier. The various ways in which the circumference of the Earth has been calculated is itself a fascinating study of the historical development of geometry. Far from thinking the Earth was flat, Christopher Columbus some 1600 years later wanted to get to India in the east – and he did so by sailing west; this only works on a sphere. Indeed, Magellan in the sixteenth century actually sailed around the whole thing!

So, yes, while it is true that some people during the last 2400 years might have thought the Earth was flat, they certainly do not represent the accepted scientific view of the world. This interplay between scientific and ‘colloquial’ understandings of the world might be an interesting avenue for discussion on its own!

For further information, use the QR codes on the left.



IN PRACTICE – BOX 3

Yes, the Nazis were unkind

In a 2003 article for *Wired* magazine, Mike Godwin offered what he called *Godwin's Law of Nazi Analogies*: ‘As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one.’ Meaning that at some point any ethical debate results in the mention of the Nazis.

My suggestion is that if Godwin's Law is true (that all internet debates result in a Nazi analogy), then TOK students would do well to avoid using the example because they are all too common. From propaganda, medical experiments and poor military strategy, all the way to disgusting racial theories, the Nazis are held up as history's bad guys. Granted, the Nazis had all sorts of offensive beliefs and engaged in a number of immoral activities, but just identifying this is not critical thought because we already know it.

If you are going to discuss propaganda, why not check the nightly news and see what the political parties near you are up to? What about certain medical experiments? Perhaps it would be more surprising and interesting to explore how the United States' Department of Public Health's Tuskegee Study/Experiment, 1932–1972, in Alabama treated its test subjects in the name of science? Are you exploring questionable scientific beliefs about racial inferiority? Do some reading on the growth of the early Eugenics movement at Cold Harbor Springs in New York State, USA, or explore the role of cultural beliefs in modern stem cell research.

For further information, search for Godwin's law.

Again, I offer these three examples, not as a general prohibition against using them; each of these can be a fantastic example of TOK principles. I only suggest that using them without making them into good examples will, because they are so common, only highlight any of their inadequacies.

■ Implications

In the level descriptor of the essay 'implications' are mentioned. To achieve Level 5 in the essay you must in some way engage with the 'implications' of your ideas about the material or the knowledge questions involved and their 'significance'. Many times, examiners will complain that students don't adequately identify and critically explore implications. But what do these terms mean?

One way to explore the implications of what you are saying in your TOK assessments is to ask the question, 'Now what?'

Of course, this question doesn't need to be explicitly included in your essay, but you might think about starting the section in which you discuss implications with, 'One implication of this point is ...?'

Identifying implications and critically evaluating them helps widen the scope of your analysis and push what you are saying into a broader context. These are things which are often successfully presented towards the end of the essay.

Implications in this sense would be about what the 'next step' of the argument might be, or what the extension of the main ideas of the argument would be. The ideas you have, if extended into new contexts, would have various consequences, and one way of evaluating an idea or a position is to explore these implications.

If, for example, you wish to argue that the seemingly random behaviour of human beings means that no human science can 'be' a *real* science, then one implication of this would be that various 'laws' created in psychology, economics or geography are not reliable. However, we see that these fields do, in fact, develop laws which for the most part are useful ways of describing general trends in human behaviours. In other words, they do produce laws which seem to describe how people generally act and have some predictive power.

Students often try to argue (unsuccessfully, in my view) that because historians often have a perspective, this means that 'all history is biased'. As 'bias' generally suggests that a claim is unreliable, there seem to be a couple of implications for this. First, that all historical claims are unreliable, since 'bias' is a *pejorative* or a term of disapproval. But there are some *genuine* cases of bias in history. Holocaust deniers and conspiracy theorists, for example, are easily accused of *bias* based on the very poor treatment of evidence in their claims which seem to go against what all the experts in the historical communities say. But if 'all history is biased', then it seems that all historical claims are unreliable in the same way as all others. The implication, then, is that we lose the ability to pick out historians who are *actually* manipulating evidence and others who are being responsible in their use of evidence. We cannot accept an analysis of the historical method which results in the claim that *no one* can use it correctly! A second implication of the claim that all history is biased has to do with truth. If all history is biased, then the very notion of 'truth' seems to be jeopardized, and while this might be a genuinely sophisticated point, students often don't engage with this implication.

Suppose a student tries to argue that 'all truth is relative'. The implications for this are pretty serious for the student's own essay: see if you can work out why.

Your argument will be stronger if you are aware of and able to engage with these implications, perhaps exploring this in terms of the differences between the human and natural sciences and showing how this actually helps you understand more deeply the scope of the human and natural sciences. In some cases, finding an implication that you believe to be unacceptable, means you have to go back and change your thesis and find one that avoids any unacceptable implications.

ACTIVITY

Once you have decided on the thesis you wish to develop, consider the following question: 'If my thesis is true, how might this affect other claims, either in the same AOK or another AOK?' Reflect on those other claims: are the effects of your thesis acceptable? Do they lead to contradictions elsewhere? Do they help support or help answer other issues relevant to TOK?

Considering the implications is a good way of reflecting on the strength of your own position – if it leads to unacceptable consequences (that all knowledge is false, for example), then maybe you should reconsider. If it helps support or engage with other issues, then perhaps it is a good thesis.

One of the traditional elements of a strong concluding paragraph is pointing out what unanswered questions remain. This 'now what?' question is another way of getting at that and is another form of 'implication'. You might explore what other topics your main point will help answer or what new context you could apply it to. This sort of 'implication' cannot be developed until you have already started writing or nearly completed the essay, as the 'what next' is 'what next after your own analysis'.

IN PRACTICE

There is another sense of the word 'implication', however, that can be explored before you begin developing your response.

In 'unpacking' titles, students should be thinking *what is implied by the title*, meaning what does the title assume?

The best essays will have pointed this out and explored this problem.

ACTIVITY

Take the list of prescribed titles that you will have to choose from for your final TOK essay.

- 1 Make a list of all the *assumptions* you think are being made by the title (another form of 'implications').
- 2 For each one, construct a *knowledge question*, which will help engage with that assumption in the title.

For example, earlier, where we saw that it was assumed that bias and selection are problems, we might ask, 'How do the methods used in the construction of historical knowledge regulate the effect of bias and selection?' or 'Why might the role of intuition and imagination lead to bias or unreliable knowledge in the sciences and history?' or 'What constitutes the proper selection of evidence in the construction of knowledge in history or ethics?'

The importance of using knowledge questions such as these in the investigation of the prescribed titles is described in Chapter 1.

■ Significance: 'So what? Who cares?'

Another key element of the best essays is the way in which they treat the significance of an issue. This is what I call the 'So what? Who cares?' element. Pointing out the significance of an issue means explaining why this is an important question to ask in the first place and why your conclusion is helpful in answering it. The best analyses are of debatable knowledge issues which have genuine consequences for our understanding and approach to knowledge. I am not suggesting that the questions you are exploring will have life and death consequences, but it might be important to understand how knowledge works for various reasons. It might be important in the political realm, for example, to understand the effect of certain types of language or the subtle techniques that academics and scientists might use to make their arguments more convincing than they should be. Whatever the knowledge issues you are exploring through the essay are, try to keep in mind why it is *important* to explore them and use that in your analysis.

■ Evidence of personal approach

Showing a personal approach is integral to a good TOK essay, particularly since the core theme is all about the individual knower. The general dynamic between 'your knowledge and the knowledge of the community of experts' should never be far from your thinking and your essay will definitely benefit from finding ways of weaving those ideas into your discussion.

You are encouraged to draw on your own experience as knowers as much as possible and wherever it is relevant, and this will certainly give your essay a personal tone. When using your own experience, you will want to make sure that your anecdotes don't become the *focus* of the essay, however. Any personal examples used in your essay should be developed in terms of the more general or 'decontextualized' questions about the relevant AOKs. Any failed experiments in chemistry, or individual research for your history extended essay, or explorations that you conducted in your mathematics class must point to some 'decontextualized' knowledge question that you are exploring. An essay full of anecdotes is unlikely to do well.

■ Be very wary of 'help' websites

Every year there are more and more online TOK 'help' websites which promise advice on how to proceed with the particular essay titles. It is not at all certain, however, that these sites give out consistently good advice. The IB takes plagiarism very seriously and is well aware of the sites and the type of advice they give. If they identify an essay which is clearly not the work of the student, that student runs the risk of breaking academic honesty rules and might lose their entire diploma. *This is not a risk worth taking.*

Examiners are trained to identify where students are succeeding and to award points accordingly, so even when a student is genuinely struggling, but nevertheless making an honest effort in the essay, that student can do well against the criteria. If, however, the student struggles and uses information inappropriately, this may constitute malpractice and could be punished with a loss of the entire diploma. In other words, it's better to try than to buy.

Your best source of advice and guidance are your *teachers*. They have the experience, can identify useful resources and will help you to negotiate the troublesome issue of using sources appropriately. They are also professionally obligated to help you develop your own ideas and they take this obligation seriously, but they won't write your essay for you!

Help websites come in a variety of types. Some are general TOK sites whose content is designed to help you develop as TOK students, not to give you answers to specific titles or tell you the 'right' ideas. These sites are less harmful and pose no more or less of a worry than any TOK textbook. If you use ideas from these sites, just be sure to reference them and use them wisely.

Some sites, however, promise to 'unpack' the titles for you or even work on your essays or ideas with you for a fee. These can be more problematic as they might have their own commercial desires at heart, rather than your own learning or success.

My advice is simply to make the best use of your own teachers, or whenever in doubt to ask your teachers about advice from a website. Follow your teacher's lead when it comes to unpacking ideas and exploring strategies and go to your own teacher if you are struggling. They know you and they have the experience you can trust. Think of faith as a way of knowing ... in whom should you be placing your trust?

While there is a lot to consider in this chapter, paying attention to some of the main ideas will not only help you both deal with the stress of writing such a challenging piece of work, but also lead you away from some common problems and hopefully lead you towards a stronger essay. While it might sound rather sad, the time spent with students as they work on their essays is the most rewarding part of my time as a TOK teacher. These essays are difficult things to write and genuinely stretch all students. Invariably, students think thoughts, develop arguments, take positions and uncover complexity in their world in a way that, in my view, no other aspect of the IB encourages. Students of all abilities will have their best thoughts when working towards this essay. (Unless they do it the night before the deadline. Then it's only a matter of luck. Don't be *that* student.)

■ Breakdown of the assessment instrument

The 'assessment instrument' is used by the examiners to judge your essay. They identify different types of skills and characteristics which we will summarize and briefly discuss below, with some advice on how the top level can be achieved.

You might find it useful to review the work you did on the activity earlier, under the section where we first introduced you to global impression marking.

What can you do to help show that you are meeting each of the elements of the assessment instrument?

■ The discussion has a sustained focus on the title

- Be able to explain how every element of your analysis can be directly related to the prescribed title.
- Maintain clear relevance to the prescribed title throughout the essay.

■ The discussion is linked effectively to areas of knowledge

- When you have the choice, explore a well-chosen range of AOKs in relation to the prescribed title.
- Use effective signposting to develop clear and explicit links to AOKs.

■ Arguments are clear and coherent

- Use effective signposting to remind your reader just where you are in the argument.
- Use the argument plan well so that you can see how the various ideas fit together before you spend too much time worrying about how to articulate them in an essay. (See page 92 for more discussion about what 'clear and coherent' mean in the context of the essay.)

■ Arguments are effectively supported by specific examples

- Examples are crucial to turning an argument that *makes sense* into an argument which is *convincing*.
- See pages 97–100 about how to develop effective examples.

■ The implications of arguments are considered

- Implications are only mentioned at Level 5 of the assessment criteria, so including them is necessary to achieve Level 5.
- See pages 101–2 for more advice about how to develop effective implications.

■ There is a clear awareness and evaluation of different points of view

- If the argument plan was done fully, this shouldn't be a problem.
- Sometimes a different perspective might be a perspective based on another AOK's perspective or focusing on another element of the knowledge framework.
- Whatever the case, remember to move beyond *identifying* or *describing* other perspectives and *evaluate* them – analyse their strengths and weaknesses – and then develop criteria to *choose* among them.

■ The planning and progress form

The paperwork associated with the essay is called the 'planning and progress form' (PPF). The PPF asks you to record the three 'interactions' with your teacher that the TOK subject guide requires. It serves two purposes:

- 1 **To provide evidence that the work is your own.** Your ideas will shift and develop over the course of thinking about and writing your essay. The three interactions are meant to chronicle these stages so that, in the event of a concern about plagiarism or an academic honesty issue, the PPF can show how your ideas developed over a long period of time. The PPF includes a teacher section where your teacher will comment on the process to add evidence that the final work is your own.

2 To provide a framework to promote the independence of the student. In other words, there are three formal interactions so that there are not four or five or a dozen. It also means that teachers know that they *should* provide advice during the process and then on one written draft. This means the teacher cannot develop your ideas for you, but they can intervene to help you make your ideas better. You must take responsibility and show genuine independence so the work that is produced and assessed is genuinely your own.

The TOK subject guide offers guidelines on the nature of these interactions, but they generally follow this structure:

- 1** Initial discussions and choice of prescribed title.
- 2** Some sort of essay plan.
- 3** A lightly commented upon draft.

If you follow the two-step process and have a clear argument, then your middle interaction can be your teacher's comments on the argument plan. They can offer quite substantial feedback there, which is important because they cannot comment on more than *one* draft. Remember, therefore, that the argument plan cannot be a full essay! This is partly why the distinction between an argument plan (abstract identification of key elements of the overall argument) and the essay draft (a presentation of that argument using the traditions and conventions of essay writing) is so crucial. If you arrive with the 'argument plan' and it really is just a draft essay, you have lost out on one of the allowed interactions.

Similarly, if you have already had two of the three interactions and suddenly take it upon yourself to change the title when it comes to write the draft, you don't necessarily get another three interactions. In most school situations there simply is not enough time (and it is not in your best interests for the school to give you the time) to take more and more runs at the essay. If you have changed the title and written a draft, then your teacher has not seen the ideas develop over time and cannot fully vouch that the final product is your own.

Filling in the PPF is not onerous. Your school will identify how the three interactions will proceed and after each of them simply chronicle:

- what happened during that interaction
- how things were going
- what ideas were discussed
- how you plan to proceed.

Your teacher will then offer a comment as to the overall process and the independence and authenticity of your ideas. No examiner ever sees the PPF.

The TOK exhibition

The TOK exhibition is a new addition to the course from 2020 first assessment 2022, and it promises to be a very exciting one which will provide students the opportunity to explore TOK in very clear and 'real-world contexts'.