Six Steps to Writing a Good TOK Essay: A Student Guide

1. **Select a Title from the list provided by the IBO.**

Do not instantly seize upon a title that sounds appealing and plunge into it headlong. Instead, **read** carefully all the titles on the list. Which one allows *you* to demonstrate best your understanding of TOK issues and *your* critical skills? Remember, that you may not change the title to something else that you wish you had been asked, but respond to what the IBO has given you.

What are the Key Words or Concepts?

Are there key words of the Theory of Knowledge course in the title – words such as "belief", "justification", or "truth"? Are you clear about what they mean? Are you aware of ambiguities, or of possible alternative meanings? Think back on class discussions and check class notes.

How are the key concepts related to each other? Put the title into your own words to make sure you understand what is being asked.

2. **Read the instruction and the Marking Criteria.**

Do not even *consider* skipping this step.

1. Read the instructions in the title. What exactly are you being told to do?

What are the Key Words of Instruction?

If you are told to "**analyze**" or "**evaluate**" a claim, then you are supposed to consider the arguments both for and against it, taking into account any ambiguities in interpreting it. Possible responses, are:

"that the claim is justified in these ways or up to this point, but not justified in those ways or beyond that point ... or applies to this Area of Knowledge more fully than the following Areas of Knowledge".

"that whether or not the claim is justified depends on what is meant by one of its key words or concepts, so that if you understand the key word this way (explain), the claim is justified, but if you understand it that way (explain), then it is not".

If you are asked "**to what extent**" or "**in what way**" a statement is justified, then you are being asked the same thing, but in different words. If you are being asked a question directly ("Is *x* true?"), your response must still take the same approach considering to what extent or in what ways you consider the answer to be *yes* or *no*.

If you are asked to "**compare**" Areas of Knowledge, Ways of Knowing, justifications, methodologies, or the like, you are being asked to examine both similarities and differences in response to the title. Possible responses, are:

"that the claim in the title is justified to some extent when applied to the Areas of Knowledge / Ways of Knowing / justifications / methods (similarities), but that the claim falls down and is not justified when applied to the Areas of Knowledge / Ways of Knowing / justifications / methods in the same way (then explain the differences)".

"that the Areas of Knowledge / Ways of Knowing / justifications / methods of the title share *this* and *that* feature of knowledge, but diverge in *this* and *that* significant feature, so that the implication in the title is either upheld or refuted".

If you are asked "**how**" something is achieved (knowing, justifying, drawing distinctions), you are usually being asked about a process or a method, and might respond by outlining steps to be taken and/or difficulties to be overcome. In some cases, the "**how**" question is simply a variation of "**in what way?**" – and that question is in turn a variation of "**analyze**".

Ultimately, all titles in Theory of Knowledge, no matter how they are phrased, ask you to do the same thing. You are being asked to ***think critically*** about major issues of knowledge.

b. Now look at the general instructions that apply to all the titles, regardless of what the keywords words within them may be. These instructions tell you exactly what you are expected to do in your essay:

"Remember to center your essay on problems of knowledge and, where appropriate, refer to other parts of your IBO program and to your experiences as a knower. Always justify your statements and provide relevant examples to illustrate your arguments. Pay attention to the implications of your arguments, and remember to consider what can be said against them. If you use external sources, cite them according to a recognized convention. ... Examiners mark essays against the title as set. Respond to the title exactly as given; do not alter it in any way".

c. Now read over the Criteria according to which your essay will be marked ("External Assessment Descriptors"). Pay attention to the description of the top mark in each of the six criteria in order to set your goals of the appropriate essay. (It does you little good to play a brilliant game of football if you are being assessed on playing tennis). Note that the first two Criteria ("Knowledge Issues" and "Quality of Analysis") are emphasized in importance by being given double points. Note that treating the Problem(s) of Knowledge implied by the prescribed title is at the core of the Knowledge Issue(s) criterion, and that analysis and evaluation are at the core of the Quality of Analysis criterion.

3. **Gather your ideas.**

* 1. Now look back to the title you have chosen and start to identify the Problems of Knowledge that it raises. This is a crucial step. (Look at the descriptions of the zeroes in the Assessment Criteria!) Do you understand clearly what a "Problem of Knowledge" is? **Remember** that a Problem of Knowledge is not a problem at all in everyday sense of the word unless you expect knowledge to be simple and certain (and then the problem may not be in the knowledge but in your expectations). **Uncertainties** and **difficulties** are an integral part of our search for knowledge, and may even (depending on your values) make it more humanly interesting. Do not treat an Area of Knowledge as inherently inferior if it is more difficult to assert that we can know something in that Area than in others.
  2. Think about how the Problems of Knowledge raised by your title are relevant to different Areas of Knowledge and Ways of Knowing. Do all cultures see these problems in the same way? What comparisons can you draw, what general conclusions do you reach, and what arguments can be made against those conclusions? What are the implications of your main points? Can you find examples to illustrate your arguments? Counter-examples? Note down you ideas quickly, without trying to structure them yet. Write until your mind runs dry. It will.
  3. Now enrich your immediate ideas by going back to your notes from your **TOK Journal** to remind yourself of class discussions and material which are relevant to your title. To illustrate your points, gather examples from notes and texts from your IB courses, the media, people you know, your personal experience, and other relevant sources. Keep track of the sources you gather in this stage, so that you can include them as citations later if necessary. Remember, though, that the TOK essay **is not** a research paper. You will not find your response to the title in a book; books and other sources give only the raw material which you must shape into your own response.
  4. If time allows, you may want to live with your ideas floating in your mind for a week or so at this point, gathering more as thoughts hit you in class, your CAS activities or elsewhere.

This step of gathering ideas is often challenging - and extremely enjoyable. It is a chance to engage your own mind in considering the central TOK question: "***How do I know?***" If you find ideas interesting or like to reflect on what beliefs or knowledge your life experience has given you, you will probably find this stage of the essay personally stimulating. Moreover, you will be given credit in your essay for pulling together the relevant ideas in a way that reflects your own thinking.

1. **Organize your ideas in preparation for writing.**

Now comes probably the greatest struggle of the essay - to move from scribbled notes to tangible ideas to a plan of the essay that organizes a sequence of arguments which respond clearly to the title.

As you put your ideas into related groups and shuffle them into order, you should identify your **THESIS** – that is, the central point or argument which you want to make in your essay. *Distill it into a single sentence and write it at the top of your plan.* Make sure that every subsection of your essay develops this core idea in some way, including considering counter-arguments to it.

There are many possible ways of structuring ideas in an essay, depending on the topic. Play around with an outline or mind-map until a sequence comes together. There is no formula for a perfect plan. The only essential requirement is that the sequence of ideas must develop your thesis, which in turn must respond to the prescribed title.

1. **Write the essay.**

By now you have done extensive thinking and planning - but you still do not have an essay! The actual writing, though, is only a small part of a good essay and if you have prepared well it should be straightforward. Keep the following points in mind as you write and revise your draft:

* 1. The marking criteria favor a concise introduction. Know where you want to go and don't use up hundreds of words just getting started.
  2. Try to develop ideas in proportion to their importance in your overall plan. Your essay must be between 1200 and 1600 words in length, so control the degree to which you expand on an idea as you go. Doing so is not easy, but it is easier than trying to readjust a whole essay at the end.
  3. You are expected to clarify concepts as you go, defining terms if necessary. ***Do not***, however, pad out your easy with definitions of terms which are not particularly ambiguous. ***Do not*** drop into your essay lumps of definitions which contribute nothing to your argument and are ignored thereafter. ***Do not***, above all, use a dictionary definition to bypass complexities: no teacher or examiner will be impressed if, after a course in which you discuss possible understandings of "Truth" or "Knowledge", you 'solve' this Problem of Knowledge by plunking down a citation from a dictionary as if you have thereby settled the matter!
  4. Select your examples from a wide variety of sources and cultures. Make sure, moreover, that they really do illustrate the points you are making. A reference to the Copernican Revolution and Galileo, for example, might not demonstrate an understanding of revolutions in thinking within contemporary science. Is there no other example you might find in science of the past 400 years?
  5. You are welcome to use "**I**" in a TOK essay. If you are speaking about your own experiences or beliefs you will probably want to do so.
  6. Check the facts. Are your assertions accurate? Acknowledge the source of any quotation or unusual pieces of information, using accepted conventions of footnotes and bibliography. (If in doubt, it is better to footnote too much than too little).
  7. Make sure that your conclusion is coherent with the arguments you made. There is no "right or wrong answer" to a prescribed title: your essay will be evaluated upon the strength of its arguments. An effective conclusion must reflect those arguments.
  8. Cut out anything that is not truly relevant, and ensure that your essay satisfies the word length requirement.

1. Hand it in—and Celebrate

A good Theory of Knowledge essay demands that you think deeply about questions of truth which thread themselves through all areas of your life. **If** you have done your best to take a significant question of knowledge and made it your own, you have achieved a goal central to your International Baccalaureate diploma—and potentially important in the growth of your thinking. Congratulations! Whatever the mark on the essay may end up being, you have reason for celebration.