**TOK essay writing advice.**

This document offers some advice on what you should and shouldn’t do when writing a TOK essay. The advice is a collation of comments made by TOK examiners, as found on the IBO website.

**Assessment and mark scheme**

TOK examiners will assess the TOK essay according to set criteria. The central question is “Does the student present an appropropriate and cogent analysis of knowledge questions in discussing the title?” In practice, the following aspects will be considered:



Examiners are told to consider whether the candidate has presented an appropriate and cogent analysis of knowledge questions in discussing the title and has:

a. understood the title

b. understood the knowledge questions that are explicit and implicit in it, and/or linked the title to knowledge questions that arise naturally from it.

c. developed and supported a comprehensive and cogent point of view about the topic and appropriate knowledge questions.

In addition to these general points, a TOK examiner will receive some additional notes on how the essay question could have been discussed. Teachers and students don’t get these points, but an example should help you to understand how the marking works.

Example essay question:

**“There are only two ways in which humankind can produce knowledge: through passive observation or through active experiment.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?**

Notes that were given examiners of this particular question:

Nature of the title

This prescribed title prompts the candidate to consider the possibility that the means of generating

all knowledge can be “boiled down” to two types. There are some structural and conceptual

matters to deal with from the start. Firstly, the sweeping nature of the claim makes it very difficult

to reach a definitive answer for all knowledge, and so any conclusions reached by the candidate

are likely to hold only for any areas chosen for inspection. Secondly, the title provides no guidance

as to the need for inclusion of areas of knowledge or ways of knowing, so the candidate must take

care to make a judicious decision concerning the breadth of coverage that will facilitate a

convincing analysis. Thirdly, the formulation of the claim provides a signal that “ways of producing

knowledge” is not to be taken as synonymous with “ways of knowing” – while there are clear

relationships between the two, a full conflation is likely to result in a very shallow analysis

consisting only of comparisons between ways of knowing. Finally, it will be important to offer a

sustained exploration of the ubiquity of the two “ways” rather than simply presenting alternatives to

them as a kind of short cut to answering the title.

Knowledge questions

Knowledge questions that a candidate might identify in the course of the development of a

response to the title include:

* What is the relationship between observation and experiment?
* Can observation ever be passive? If not, does this imply that objective knowledge is impossible?
* Can introspection and reflection count as types of observation? If so, does this permit a role for observation in every area of knowledge?
* Can activities that are unplanned or lacking a clear prior purpose count as experiments? If so, does this permit a role for experimentation in every area of knowledge?
* Do observation and experiment have roles in the production of personal knowledge?
* What ways of knowing are especially involved in observation and experiment? Are they involved in other ways of producing knowledge?
* What other ways of producing knowledge might be suggested, and on what basis can they be distinguished from observation and experiment?

Commentary on possible treatment

The prescribed title proposes two methods of producing knowledge. While few candidates are

likely to take issue with the idea that experimentation is an active process, there is potentially much

to be said about the controversial claim that observation is passive. Additionally, experiment, as

traditionally understood, seems to include the necessity for observation, and so the two ways of

producing knowledge do not seem to be wholly independent. Furthermore, if one presupposes the

other, but not the other way around, the relationship between them seems asymmetric.

Candidates may reflect on the importance of observing as the first step in the production of

knowledge in many circumstances. However, our attention is selectively drawn to certain features

or phenomena within any situation (depending upon, for example, what we are looking for, or

according to our biological or cultural predispositions), which suggests that observation is an active

process, and may actually be impossible to execute in an entirely passive manner. On the other

hand, perhaps it could be argued that these limitations restrict our freedom to observe in an active

fashion. There may be some elaboration on this issue in the context of sense perception as a way

of knowing. The question may present itself as to whether, with passive observation ruled out,

objective knowledge becomes impossible. It might be suggested that experimentation is a

panacea for this kind of difficulty with the process of observation, in that experiments involve active

counter-measures against the subjectivity of observation. In achieving this, experimentation

makes use of reason (and arguably other ways of knowing such as imagination). Regardless of

the active nature of experimentation, candidates might consider whether there are any

– 7 –

circumstances in which the production of knowledge can be entirely passive. Addressing these

issues may strongly influence the subsequent shape of candidates' essays.

It may be helpful to consider observation and experiment first through fairly strict interpretive

lenses, and then to see how far the concepts can be stretched in an attempt to agree with the

assertion in the prescribed title. An obvious place to start is with the natural sciences, in which

both of these processes have clear roles. It may be fruitful to try to distinguish between the natural

sciences that are primarily experimental (eg chemistry) and those which present major challenges

to experimentation (eg astronomy or paleontology). Either way, however, the title seems to have

the diversity of this area of knowledge covered.

Observation in this uncontroversial sense also has an important role in some of the human

sciences (eg anthropology), and seems to be very highly developed in many indigenous

knowledge systems in which a strongly empirical approach to knowledge is key. The

apprehension of art works through the senses also counts as a form of observation, although it

might be argued that its purpose here is distinct from that intended elsewhere. Furthermore, if

“experiment” is understood as a carefully designed intervention into nature involving the control of

variables and strict protocols for the collection of results, it might be difficult for candidates to make

a case for it beyond the sciences. Attention to distinctions of this type might lead the candidate to

dispute that the suggested methods in the title are actually viable homogeneous concepts and start

to doubt if they, on their own, actually encompass just two ways of producing knowledge.

Taking a more inclusive line, we might be persuaded to agree that historians observe the relics of

the past. In a similarly generous vein, perhaps the struggles of artists to realize their intentions

could be considered experimental in nature, as might those investigations undertaken by

mathematicians that are based to some extent on trial and error. Observation might be considered

to embrace introspection and reflection, which would expand its role in the production of

knowledge in the human sciences and religious knowledge systems.

Despite any such attempts to reconcile the two methods in the prescribed title with the full

spectrum of knowledge, candidates are likely to conclude that there is a shortfall. In the field of

shared knowledge, it is clear that mathematicians have a highly (arguably uniquely) effective

method for knowledge production in deductive proof, and furthermore this method might be said to

be guided by intuitions that precede it. Neither of these methods seems to fall under observation

or experiment. It could be argued that trying to force the work of the historian into these two

categories also does violence to methods in this area – with the involvement of source analysis

and the application of imagination and empathy. In some religions, faith acts as a foundation for

knowledge, which may also be obtained according to advocates by some form of unmediated

revelation. And the bonds of common emotional experience make understanding in religion and

also the arts possible and meaningful. While much knowledge production in the natural sciences

might ultimately rest upon the activities of observation and experiment, some is generated

proximally through a process of integration of disparate things that are already known. This is

arguably a distinct “way”.

Turning to personal knowledge, candidates may conclude that the two methods stated in the title

offer only partial explanation for what we know as individuals. While many of our skills develop

through emulating those who already can display them, they can also be influenced by innate

abilities and dedicated practice, and few would argue that observation alone is the route to

excellence. Self-knowledge might be obtained through introspection and reflection (and thus

arguably also be reconciled with the “observation” strand in the title), but candidates may well

assert that a wider variety of ways of knowing are involved and essential to the process. In the

end, perhaps the array of ways of knowing displayed by the TOK programme is, after all, a fair

indicator that the title offers too narrow an approach to the production of knowledge.

Specific comments on how the examiners felt about the essays in the past can be found on the subject reports on the OCC.

Comments which have showed up year after year mention how students were not answering the essay question, especially when they altered the title into a knowledge question, which was not really the same as the title anymore. Once a student starts answering something which is not the title anymore, students will get a very poor grade as it becomes an ‘irrelevant response’.

**Common mistakes and how to avoid them**

Many of the mistakes that are made by weaker students result from poorly developed understanding of the objectives combined with following a weak process. Some of the common mistakes seen in TOK essays are identified below, along with advice on how they can be avoided.

**Misunderstanding the nature of the essay**

The goal of the TOK essay is not to evaluate the personal values of students, to explore conspiracy theories or to debate moral issues and themes. The essay invites students to consider the factors that influence our willingness to accept or reject information as knowledge. Students who do not appreciate this will often produce essays that fail to address the task and the criteria. Students should also remember that the TOK essay is not a research essay and so is not subject to the same requirements as the extended essay (apart from the requirements associated with academic honesty).

**The scope of the essay**

It is important that students are realistic about how much they can cover in a TOK essay which can be a maximum of 1,600 words. They are not being asked to consider all of the points that could potentially be made; indeed they should recognize that doing so will limit their ability to explore the points that they do raise in sufficient depth. Students need to be guided to reflect on, evaluate and select the most relevant ideas from the many that they have generated in the planning of their essay.

**Unfocused introduction**

Successful introductions tend to be dedicated to three main goals:

* establishing some clarity about the key terms and concepts used in the title
* stating a position, that is, agree, disagree, agree with reservations, disagree with reservations
* identifying the WOKs and AOKs that the essay will focus on.

Essays that open with generalized observations about mankind’s eternal quest for knowledge tend to set the scene for a descriptive essay, and often cause the student to digress. These introductions also tend to cause readers to quickly lose faith in the purpose of the essay.

Strong essay introductions ensure that they address all aspects of the title, and that they consider any assumptions that are written into the title. They do not assume that the title can only ever be addressed from one position.

**Ineffective use of examples**

Strong essays will seek to employ a range of specific examples (contemporary, drawn from personal experience, cross-cultural, from multiple eras, drawn from the course) and will make relevant use of them. When we refer to specific examples we mean making reference to a particular artist/artwork or scientist/scientific theory, rather than making a generic reference to “artists” or “scientists”. Effective examples invariably seek to relate the example back to the title, and to extend, fairly directly, from the example to the knowledge question that it was employed to illustrate. Students should avoid using hypothetical examples. Students who base their arguments on hypothetical examples that are invariably vague, unconvincing and anecdotal usually produce essays that fail to arrive at clear knowledge conclusions.

Students should also avoid using too many examples. Students who approach the essay from a content perspective tend often to make the mistake of filling the essay with large numbers of examples, skipping from one to the other without unpacking the significance of each. This tends to make the essay more descriptive than analytical.

**Failure to refer to WOKs and AOKs**

Students should identify which WOKs and AOKs their essay will focus on in their opening statements. It is crucial that students use the language of TOK appropriately, making explicit reference to the terms “ways of knowing” and “areas of knowledge.”

**Claims are not fully explored and evaluated**

Strong students often fail to achieve full return for their efforts because they fail to fully develop the claims that they incorporate into their discussion, and fail to justify and evaluate those claims.

**Counterclaims are ignored**

Essays that explore counterclaims are more likely to approach the title as a debate about knowledge and are therefore less likely to make the mistake of treating the essay simply as one-sided statements of the student’s own viewpoint or opinion.

**Failure to consider implications**

Many students fail to achieve the highest marks because although they make sound arguments, they fail to consider the implications of their arguments.

Preparing for the TOK essay

In order to prepare for the essay, students should ensure they add all the necessary elements in their plan.

The essay planning form on www.sohowdoweknow.weebly.com (bottom of home page) asks students to explicitly add all these elements in the planning.

The OCC gives the following advice on essay planning :

Wilst preparing the essay students should :

* fully consider the implications of the title
* apply it to their own experiences
* research and unpack relevant examples
* arrive at a complex understanding of the criteria that they are addressing
* meaningfully reflect on the response that they are formulating
* draw from their course experience
* fully consider the implications of the knowledge issues that the title addresses
* phrase their response in a manner that allows them to maximize use of the word limit that the task is governed by.

Breaking the task down into stages

Teachers should give thought to breaking the task down into stages. One suggested breakdown would be the following stages:

* interpret the title
* define the key terms and concepts in the title
* identify the knowledge questions that are central to the discussion
* state a position
* identify the ways of knowing that are most significant to the discussion
* identify the areas of knowledge that will be central to the response
* identify the significant claims and counterclaims.

**what does this mean in practice ?**

Interpret the title

Students often complete and submit their TOK essays having only arrived at a broad superficial understanding of the title that they are addressing. This commonly leads to essays that fail to address the title, or that quickly deviate from the title.

In many instances students produce wordy and descriptive essays because they are actually attempting to arrive at an understanding of the title while in the process of completing their responses. For this reason a strong starting point is to simply invite students to rephrase the title in their own terms, “I believe that this title is stating …”

If students find it difficult to explain the title in their own terms, or even are initially unable to do this, the experience itself will encourage detailed discussion of the title which will deepen their understanding and ensure that the rest of the process is more meaningful and productive.

Define the key terms and concepts in the title

While lengthy dictionary definitions of terms are often a feature of weak descriptive responses, essays that fail to consider the central terms and concepts also tend not to explore the knowledge questions raised by the title. If the student is presented with a title which includes a phrase such as “There are no absolute distinctions between what is true and what is false” they will need to arrive at some personal understanding of the terms “absolute”, “distinction”, “true” and “false”.

Strong essays will often produce ongoing consideration of the key concepts in the title, possibly establishing that what is true for one context such as ethics may vary from what is true in another such as mathematics. Students who skip past this process are at great risk of overlooking key parts of the question or of producing responses without having fully understood the title itself. Students who define these terms in their own words are more likely to quickly take control of the essay and tend more often to produce essays that demonstrate personal engagement.

Identify the knowledge questions that are central to the discussion

Students should then be invited to formally identify the knowledge questions related to the title. If they do this they are far more likely to make effective use of the examples that they incorporate into their essay and they will be better equipped to respond to the title as a discussion of knowledge claims and their implications.

State a position

In most instances TOK titles invite students to adopt a position with respect to the title:

I agree - I disagree - I agree with reservations - I disagree to an extent.

If students are required to adopt a position then they are better equipped to recognize their response as a discussion of knowledge that naturally invites counterclaims and they are less likely to gravitate to the format that remains most familiar to them, the opinion essay. Students who formalize their position are also less likely to produce lengthy, generalized and descriptive introductions that use up space in the essay and limit the likelihood of establishing a knowledge agenda.

Identify the ways of knowing that are most significant to the discussion

Some prescribed titles specify which or how many WOKs should be addressed. However, others leave it to the students to decide which WOKs to include. As the TOK essay is only a maximum 1,600 words, it is not possible to cover all of the WOKs in depth in a single essay. Students should be encouraged to identify which WOKs they will focus on from the beginning, as this tends to produce a more focused in-depth response. It is suggested that students should select two or three WOKs which allows for effective contrasts to be made.

Identify the areas of knowledge that will be central to the response

Some prescribed titles specify which or how many AOKs should be addressed. However, others leave it to the students to decide which AOKs to cover. Essays that seek to address too many AOKs tend to become overloaded and consequently lose depth. For that reason, students can benefit from making an initial decision of which AOKs to include, perhaps the two AOKs they feel are most relevant and helpful to their response.

Identify the significant claims and counterclaims

Students must be able to develop claims in response to the knowledge questions through reasoned argument and the use of appropriate real-world examples. Students may need help in producing argumentative essays. To access the highest markbands for the essay students must explicitly, and in detail, explore counterclaims.

**Examiner feedback**

To further understand what makes a good or a bad TOK essay, it is worth looking at the examiners’ feedback. The essays can be found on the OCC.

COMMENTS ON ESSAYS with 10 marks :

Essay M—Level 5 (10 marks)

The essay has a clear introduction which indicates the scope of the essay. The essay is fully focused on the title and the distinction between personal and shared knowledge along with the idea of shared knowledge influencing personal knowledge is very much at the forefront of the essay. This means that the essay is not structured through the areas of knowledge and ways of knowing; nevertheless an understanding of these is still very much in evidence. This is an example of a very personal and highly insightful response from a candidate which still retains credibility – for example the treatment of ethics is clear and engaged with the title, even though the candidate does not relate this through formal theories of ethics. Knowledge questions are not explicitly stated but the clarity of the response indicates that there is a sustained focus on the answers to knowledge questions. The essay deals well with counter claims. In this case, by choosing to structure the essay through shared and personal knowledge a little depth is lost in the analysis of the areas of knowledge, which in part stops this essay from being awarded the highest grade. This essay is also slightly flawed by the fact that the candidate does not fully explore the implications of what is being said. Nevertheless the highly personal voice of the essay combined with a strong focus on the title and good analysis makes this a lucid and compelling level 5 essay, but at the lower end of the band.

Essay N—Level 5 (10 marks)

This is a clear, well organised and coherent essay. The essay begins with a clear introduction which gives the reader a strong indication of the scope of the essay. The candidate has chosen to structure the essay through good examples and has demonstrated the role of ways of knowing and areas of knowledge within those examples to great effect. For example the treatment of ethics and history within the context of the justice system is insightful and lucid and shows excellent awareness of ToK. The treatment of medical scenarios is not quite as good, but is nevertheless a strong piece of ToK analysis. The candidate has effectively shown different perspectives and analysed counterclaims. Overall this is an accomplished and compelling piece of writing containing relevant, well thought through examples and arguments which are effectively evaluated and lead to a coherent conclusion. Knowledge questions are not explicitly stated but the clarity of the response indicates that there is a sustained focus on the answers to knowledge questions. Although the treatment of implications is a little limited and the conclusion a little pedestrian, this remains a cogent and discerning essay. Hence it is clearly a level 5 essay and the minor flaws do not stop it being awarded the highest mark.

Essay O—Level 5 (10 marks)

Overall this is a clear, well organised and coherent essay. It starts out relevantly but not profoundly but as the essay progresses into the natural science and the writer’s personal circumstances there is an improvement in the level of analysis. By the end of the essay the candidate has written an individual and compelling response to the title. The knowledge questions are not explicitly stated but the insightful nature of the essay demonstrates that there has been a consistent focus on the answers to knowledge questions. The fact that the candidate links the areas of knowledge under question back with each other at various points in the essay is indicative of the sophistication of this essay. The candidate succeeds in addressing counter-examples and in showing a variety of perspectives, which results in a highly effective evaluation of the areas of knowledge. The essay succeeds in making some substantive implications, although this could be improved. This is not a perfect ToK essay, but it is lucid and accomplished. Despite the flaws this response fully fits the level 5 descriptors and hence lies at the upper end of that level.

COMMENTS ON ESSAYS WITH LOW MARKS :

Essay H—Level 2 (4 marks)

The essay starts with a quite promising introduction, which makes a genuine but not wholly successful attempt to define terms and give an indication of the scope of the essay. The knowledge question stated at the end of the introduction is potentially slightly tangential to the title, but is not fully explored in the body of the essay. The main body of the essay starts with a consideration of faith which is rather descriptive and the brief example provided of cheating on a test is trivial. The example of cheating is then extended into a long counter claim which shows a superficial understanding of either the areas of knowledge under consideration or the ways of knowing. The candidate then considers intuition and makes the distinction between intuition and instinct which is a positive point. Unfortunately the candidate then again gives a weak example which leads to a rudimentary argument which lacks depth. The conclusion to the essay demonstrates that the candidate only has a limited understanding of the question. The essay shows some awareness of knowledge questions related to the title, but the level of exploration is weak and not fully focused on the title; the focus on the ways of knowing being responsible for instinctive judgements rather than acting as “checks” is problem in this essay. The examples provided are weak and there is only a superficial understanding of the areas of knowledge and ways of knowing. Overall this is a limited and underdeveloped essay which is clearly in the level 2 descriptor, but at the upper end.

Essay E—Level 1 (1 marks)

The introduction to the essay is a one-dimensional statement about passive observation and active experimentation which gives no further indication on what to expect from the essay. This is followed by a paragraph which describes how a book on T’ai-Chi made the writer think about the research he/she were undertaking on bifurcation theory which then leads to a consideration of the knowledge question. The links to the title are totally unconvincing. The candidate then claims to consider the scientific method through the example of Fazey and Hardy and then through the planet Pluto no longer being classed as a planet. The explanation of the examples is very difficult to follow and the relevance to the title left entirely to the reader to determine. The example of Carl Linnaeus does make an understandable reference to passive observation and active experimentation, but how it links to what went before is difficult to see. The argument on passive experiment which follows this is almost wholly incomprehensible. The example which follows on Piaget is more comprehensible but not convincing. In the conclusion the candidate begins a whole new example of mathematics and the division of zero by zero, and again the link to the title remains very difficult to see. Ultimately most of the essay is a stream of examples which are difficult to follow in their own right, but become virtually impossible to follow in relation to the title. Occasionally there are references back to the title which although unexplored could have relevance. This saves the essay from being placed in the level 0 descriptor and hence is placed at the lower end of the level one descriptor.

Essay F—Level 1 (2 marks)

The essay begins with a disjointed introduction which only shows a very limited understanding of the title. The question posed at the end of the first paragraph seems, at best, tangentially related to the title. The description of the arts and history which follows adds very little. The whole of the essay from this point on is based on an understanding of the women’s movement through the arts and history, but the role played by the arts and history is left to the reader to figure out. As this section progresses the candidate introduces a specific example but no mention is made of personal and shared knowledge. By this point the candidate has entirely lost the focus on the title. The link to personal and shared knowledge is then addressed at the end of this description on history, feminism and art, but only shows an ineffective understanding. However, on a very basic level this section of the essay needs to be given credit as it is not wholly ineffective. Overall this is a basic and descriptive essay which only seems to occasionally reference the title. It is clearly in the level one descriptor but the brief attempt at the end to address shared knowledge shaping personal knowledge is enough to place it at the upper end of the descriptor.