

THE TOK ESSAY

An In-Depth Guide



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The Examiner's Perspective



The Basics

The following guide will provide you with an overview of what examiners look for in a TOK essay before breaking down the steps you need to take to complete yours to a high standard.

Your essay will be marked by an external IB examiner and given a score out of 10. These 10 points are divided into 5 levels, ranging from 'excellent' to 'rudimentary'.

Your goal is to provide a clear, coherent, and critical exploration of the chosen essay question. To determine if you've done that, the examiner will focus on various targets listed in the assessment tool (which we will look at in more detail below).

It's worth remembering that examiners are instructed to reward you for what you do well and not to punish you for anything you've done poorly. This means if you don't do as well in a particular section of the rubric, markers won't deduct points from other parts.

Apart from considering the assessment tool, examiners will also make a 'global impression' mark which is based on the overall quality of your essay. For this reason, it's important to pay attention to things such as how you format and reference your essay, as well as ensuring that you thoroughly proofread your work before submission.

The Five Key Assessment Targets

To do well in your essay, you need to focus on the following five key objectives:

1. Being relevant to the title

2. Making connections to the Areas of Knowledge (AOKs)

3. Offering effective arguments

4. Evaluating different points of view.

5. Considering implications

To know whether you're actually meeting these criteria, constantly ask yourself the following questions while you are writing your essay:

1. Being relevant to the title

- Do you use the key terms from the title as the basis for your arguments and do they appear in each paragraph?
- Does your conclusion actually answer the question?

2. Making connections to the AOK's

- Have you structured your essay using an appropriate number of AOK's (usually two) and not just specific fields or disciplines?
- Do you compare and contrast the AOK's in the context of your argument?

3. Offering effective arguments

- For each of your arguments do you provide a compelling point and supporting evidence?
- Do you avoid making sweeping generalizations?

4. Evaluating different points of view

- Have you considered (strong) potential counterpoints to your argument?
- Are you dedicating roughly the same amount of your word count to each perspective?

5. Considering implications

- Have you shown what some of the real world consequences of your claims may be?
- Have you shown how such consequences could determine the way we should go about producing and acquiring knowledge in future?

Key Characteristics

*The assessment tool also details the following attributes of an excellent essay which are: **insightful, convincing, accomplished, and lucid.***

As with the assessment targets, you can use the below questions as a guide to whether you are fulfilling the requirements for each attribute:

Insightful

- Does your essay deal with the question in a nuanced way, i.e. not just answering the question in a very black or white manner?
- How original and well-thought out are your arguments?

Convincing

- Do you think the reader will find your arguments persuasive?

- Have you justified your ideas and arguments with concrete, real-world examples?
- Have you used the ideas of academics and other experts from within the AOK's you are using to support your points?

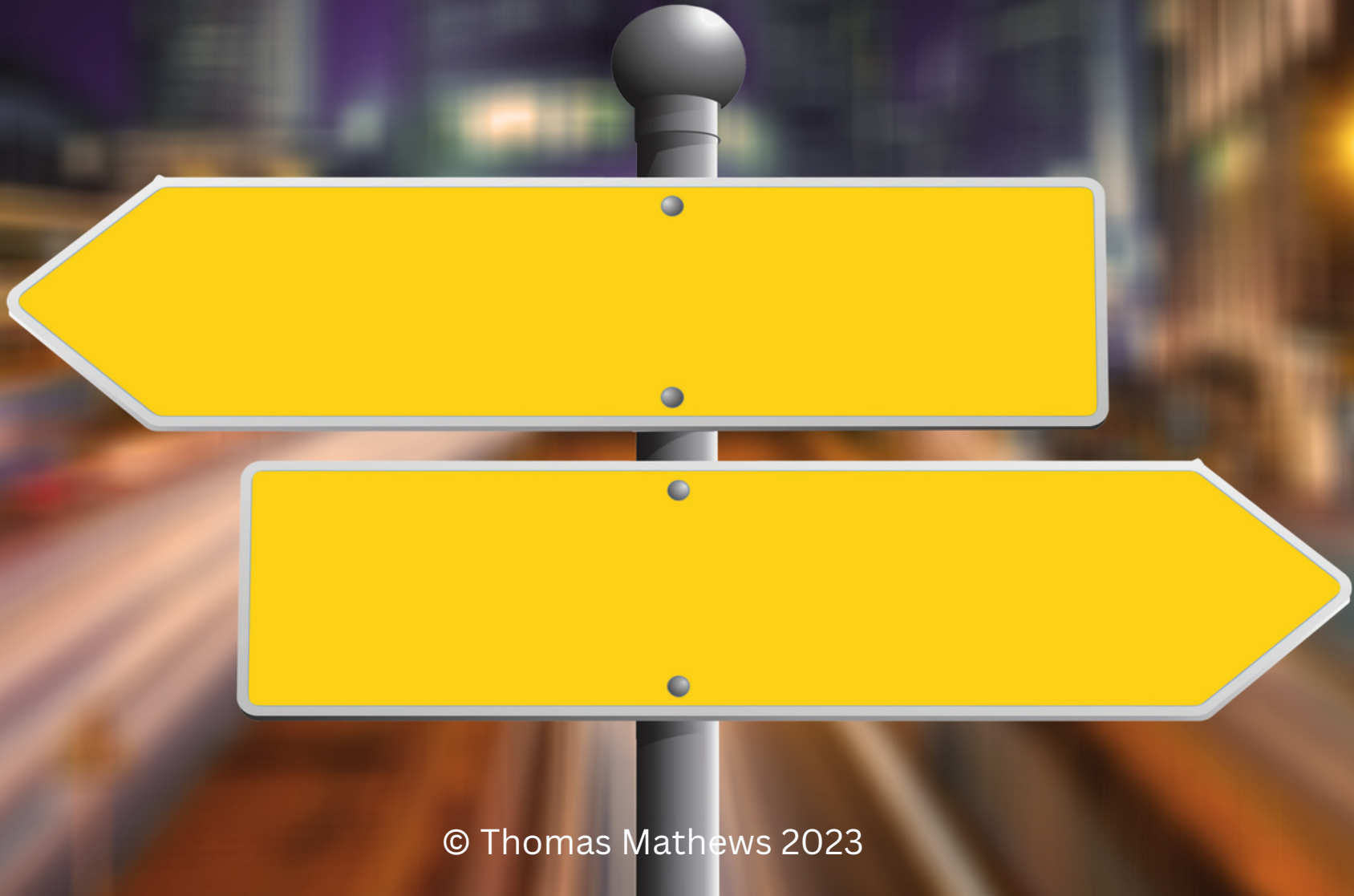
Accomplished

- Have you demonstrated your understanding of the title question and provided a clear answer to it?
- How relevant and unique are your examples?

Lucid

- Is your essay written in a way that makes your arguments and ideas easy for your reader to understand?
- Do you keep your focus on the question and avoid going off on tangents?
- Could you state the main point from each section in a single sentence?

Choosing Your Title



Whilst deciding which prescribed title to go with may be tricky, the following tips can help you narrow down your choices and identify the most promising option.

First impressions count

If you look at a title and your first thought is along the lines of: “What on earth does this even mean??”, it would probably be a good idea to rule that one out. On the other hand, if you feel that you have a good grasp of what a question is asking and can already think of some relevant ideas to answer with it, you should add it to your shortlist.

Key words and phrases

When identifying the key terms from the title, of course you need to select any important themes or ideas that are mentioned, but also look out for qualifiers such as ‘always’ and ‘often’ as these change the nature of the question. For any words or phrases you have identified, try to explain them as simply as possible. Consider possible synonyms, and even antonyms, to help you thoroughly understand them. Particularly keep an eye out for words with multiple meanings and don’t make any assumptions about how they are being defined in the context of the question. Whilst ToK essay titles often include words with pretty straightforward, singular,

definitions (such as knowledge production say), they also use terms which could have multiple meanings.

Relate the title to the course

Think about which Relevant AOK's and themes you could use to address the question. Note that certain titles tell you which AOK's you have to use. Also, using elements of the knowledge framework (scope, perspectives, methods & tools, and ethics), as well as the different themes, can be very useful starting points for your arguments if you can find a way to link them to the title.

Find a personal angle

Apart from picking a question which you're confident you can link to the ToK course, ideally you want a title that speaks to you personally. If your question deals with knowledge and culture for example, you might begin your essay with a short anecdote recounting your experiences moving abroad at a young age and having to adapt to a different cultural context. Apart from life experiences, you can think more broadly about your education, things that you've studied in the past which you could reflect on through the lens of the prescribed title.

Teacher Interaction 1



The interactions are 15-20 minute one-on-one meetings (in person or online) with your teacher to discuss the state of your essay. It is crucial that you take full advantage of these as they will help you to stay on track. Ask your teacher questions, listen to their advice and apply it.

The purpose of the first interaction is to cover the following points:

- Your choice of PT and why you want to answer it.
- Demonstrate your understanding of your chosen PT.
- Highlight key words/phrases from the PT.
- Consider which AOKs you will use.
- Brainstorm ideas (thinkers, concepts, examples, etc.) which you think may be relevant to your essay.

By the end of this first discussion, you should:

- Know which PT you'll do
- Have an idea of which AOKs you'll use
- Be prepared to write the introduction (which you need to bring to the second interaction)
- Have a basic outline of your plan

Following this interaction, you will need to complete the first field of your PPF (planning and progress form. As the PPF isn't directly assessed, you don't need to worry about going into too much detail, but at least mention the basic points you have discussed with your teacher so that the marker can get an idea of your thought process.

Planning the Essay



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Planning a TOK essay is a pretty daunting task, but breaking this process down into some clear steps can be very helpful.

The Introduction

Whilst it is definitely advisable to wait until you have a proper plan before jumping in and writing your essay, writing a rough introduction before anything else can be a useful way to think through what you want to cover and provide a starting point for your arguments.

Begin by creating a '**hook**' to grab your reader's attention – this could be an interesting opening, like a quote or a provocative statement, that connects to the title. Then explain the **key words** of the title and how you will be interpreting them. Make sure not to use generic and uninteresting dictionary definitions!

You will also need to state the **scope** of your essay, in other words the **AOK's** you'll be using. Although in most cases you can choose whichever two AOK's you want to address the question with, some PT's contain at least one which is compulsory for you to use.

You may also wish to put a **thesis statement** to finish off your introduction, in other words a brief preview of your main claim/point, but this is not compulsory.

Mapping Out Your Arguments

Generally speaking, the main body of your essay should consist of **two developments** to correspond with the two AOK's you are using to answer the question.

Whilst there are a number of different ways to structure your essay, a simple format you can use is as follows:

Start each AOK section with your **main claim**. Then, explore the argument without referring to a specific example. Here you could mention any **TOK themes and concepts** or quotes from notable thinkers which you deem relevant to your argument. You would then include a concrete **real world example** to support your claim. In a separate paragraph, you would then do the same with a counterclaim which provides a robust challenge to your claim. You should round off each AOK section with a **mini-conclusion** summarizing both the claim and counter-claim.

Keeping to this structure makes it easy for the assessor to follow your argument.

Research

An essential component of your essay will be the examples you draw on to support your points. These need to be concrete, real world examples, such as political movements or scientific innovations, rather than hypothetical situations. They can however also be based on personal experiences. Indeed, I would recommend using both first-hand and second-hand examples throughout your essay to add some variety.

Try to make your examples as original as possible and absolutely avoid any cliched ones (a list of which you can find here www.toklifeline.com/post/tok-essay-examples-ones-to-avoid).

You can find examples from a variety of news, research and educational platforms such as BBC, the Eurasia Group and TED. If you are struggling to find fitting examples, the TOK Lifeline Essay Title Guides (which you can find on www.toklifeline.com/essayguides) also contain examples which are relevant to each specific question.

Teacher Interaction 2



In the second interaction with your teacher you will cover the following points:

- Your potential claims and counterclaims
- The examples and thinkers you may use to support your ideas
- Address any problems or doubts you have had

By the end of this second discussion, you should:

- Have completed your introduction
- Have a detailed essay plan ready
- Know how you are going to answer the question (at least provisionally) and be ready to start writing
- Be prepared to complete the second section of the PPF

Writing the Essay



Developing your Arguments

An effective argument is one which is clearly presented and supported by evidence. As such, a simple but effective structure to follow in both your claim and counter-claim paragraphs is as follows:

- Begin with a sentence outlining your argument
- Go a little more depth into your argument
- Provide an example to illustrate your point
- Explain how this example is particularly relevant

After following this format for both the claim and counterclaim, also remember to finish the section with a mini-conclusion. Examiners also look favourably on those essays which critically compare the AOK's that you use, so make sure you highlight any notable differences, or similarities, between the two in your argument.

Exploring Different Perspectives

Throughout your essay it is important to consider different points of view and how having a particular perspective could shape someone's response to the title question.

Within TOK, perspectives encompasses a wide range of factors which influence an individual's point of view. These include, but are certainly not limited to, gender, political affiliation, religious beliefs, geographical location, and historical era. After all, an individual who has grown up in a secular environment could have markedly different views regarding questions of morality in the Arts to someone with a strict and traditional religious upbringing. In short, exploring different perspectives is crucial for giving your argument depth.

Addressing Implications

Examiners will also look at how well you can think about the practical implications of your arguments, examples, and ideas in the real world. This typically involves addressing how they may affect the ways we produce, understand and use knowledge.

Writing the Conclusion

A good conclusion should restate the key points of your essay and take a position on the title's question. This would be a good point to address the most important real world implication of your argument and briefly mention a possible limitation in your argument, i.e. was there something which you were unable to address within the scope of your essay? Having said that, do not introduce any new points in the conclusion.

Final Interaction



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Before your last interaction, it is critical that you get your essay into the best state possible. The lower the number of issues that need to be addressed, the more you will be able to focus on those areas which are particularly in need of improvement. This final interaction is when you will receive the most comprehensive guidance from your teacher. Prior to the meeting, they'll give you a written commentary which you'll then discuss together.

In this final interaction you'll:

- Talk about the teacher's comments and address any remaining doubts
- Identify any weaknesses or ambiguities in your arguments and examples
- Make sure that you've included an evaluation of different views, and implications
- Ensure your essay exhibits the key characteristics (insightful, convincing, accomplished and lucid)
- Check that your work is clearly written and appropriately formatted and referenced as well

Finishing Touches



After making any recommended changes you discussed with your teacher, double check that you have done the following before submitting your essay:

- Ensured every paragraph directly addresses the question.
- Defined the key terms using your own interpretations.
- Referred explicitly to AOKs, not just individual disciplines.
- Linked the AOK's and other TOK concepts to ensure the essay's coherence.
- Confirmed that your examples are relevant and concrete.
- Reflected on the arguments and examples using your personal experiences and cultural perspective.
- Included linking sentences and phrases to ensure your essay flows.
- Followed the formatting rules for the TOK essay: 1600 words, size 12 font, double spaced, full title, cite sources using single style, no argument in footnotes.
- Proofread your essay, checking for any language/grammatical errors which could confuse the examiner.