

Planning the TOK Essay

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Part One. Introductory steps: Advice on creating your essay plan

1 Interpret the title

A strong starting point is to rephrase the title in your own terms, “I believe that this title is stating ...”

This will deepen your understanding and ensure that the rest of the process is meaningful and productive.

2 Define the key terms and concepts in the title

Avoid lengthy dictionary definitions of terms but you must define the key terms and concepts and use these to explore the knowledge questions raised by the title.

You should also define the terms for each area of knowledge that you will use in the essay. This will allow you to signpost your essay and give you the opportunity to compare and contrast them straight away.

If you are presented with a title which includes a phrase such as “There are no absolute distinctions between what is true and what is false” you 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.

If you skip past this process, you are at great risk of overlooking key parts of the question or of producing responses without having fully understood the title itself.

If you define these terms in your own words you are more likely to quickly take control of the essay and will be more likely to produce essays that demonstrate personal engagement.

3 Identify the knowledge questions that are central to the discussion

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

Look at the assumptions from the title and find any `weaknesses` with the question that you can counterclaim.

4 State a position

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

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

If you adopt a position you are better equipped to recognize your response as a discussion of knowledge that naturally invites counterclaims and they are less likely to produce an opinion essay.

If you formalize your position you are 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.

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

Some prescribed titles specify which or how many ways of knowing should be addressed. However, others leave it to you to decide which ways of knowing to include.

As the TOK essay is only a maximum 1,600 words, it is not possible to cover all of the ways of knowing in depth in a single essay.

You should identify which ways of knowing you will focus on from the beginning, as this will produce a more focused in-depth response.

You should select two or three ways of knowing which allows for effective contrasts to be made.

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

Some prescribed titles specify which or how many areas of knowledge should be addressed. However, others leave it to you to decide which ways of knowing to cover.

It is recommended to use two areas of knowing to make sure your essay doesn't lose depth

You will be expected to participate in an introductory group practice planning discussion with the teacher and other students who have chosen your prescribed title. The aim of the discussion is to focus on the usefulness of specific Areas of Knowledge to the specific question and realise the challenges of others.

7 Identify the significant claims and counterclaims

You must be able to develop claims in response to the knowledge questions through reasoned argument and the use of appropriate real-world examples. You must produce an argumentative. To get the highest markband for the essay you must explicitly, and in detail, explore counterclaims.

8 Brainstorming and organizing ideas

If you have established the parameters for discussion then you should come to this stage of their preparation with much more focus.

When brainstorming ideas you should generate ideas, find good examples, discuss the question with more people such as teachers and parents, and provide yourself with a better range of ideas to draw from.

Make a note of all the ideas you can use in your essay. You will be asked to present an A4 plan and if it seems reasonable and workable, you will be allowed them to start the essay proper.

9 Researching examples

You could choose to do this as part of the brainstorming but it generally makes more sense for you to research their examples after you have decided on the points that you seek to make.

One of the most common causes for weak essay responses comes from the poor selection of examples.

Make sure you use relevant website like <http://mrhoyestokwebsite.com/> and <http://www.theoryofknowledge.net/>

You can also use magazines, documentaries and books to find interesting and relevant examples to use in your essay.

Part Two. An example essay plan from the IB

Example Prescribed Title:

“There are no absolute distinctions between what is true and what is false”

Interpret the title:

I think this title is stating that you can't really cut a clean line between what is true and what is false, that there is a sort of grey line between them where things are relatively

true or relatively false, as opposed to a clean border where you cross over into the world of trueness.

Define the key terms and concepts in the title:

- **Absolute:** Something that is complete and unequivocal, not something that has fuzzy edges.
- **Distinction:** Being able to tell one thing from the other.
- **False:** Something that is not true. This can be something that is believed, at the time to be true, but later gets disproven. If this occurs then, even though it was believed it was, all that time, false.
- **True:** Something that is justifiable and believable. In this case it could be something that you can show to people or that you can sufficiently justify.

Identifying the knowledge questions: The title is inviting me to consider what truth and falseness are and whether or not they remain absolute across time, in different areas of knowledge and even in different cultures.

State a position: I mostly agree with this. I think that true and false are spectrums but I only agree to an extent because I acknowledge that this is less so in some areas of knowledge than it is in others.

Identify the key ways of knowing: I think that this applies to all of the WOKs, but the most significant ones to consider are reason, emotion and sense perception.

Identify the areas of knowledge: I intend to use mathematics, science and history to illustrate my response.

Identify the most significant claims and counterclaims: The key counterclaim that I will use is that in mathematics equations are generally regarded as clearly either true or false but I will show that in some cases an equation can be both.

Part Three. Essay plan template

Once you have completed your introductory steps, you should be well placed to prepare a visual plan of the essay that you are going to complete.

Producing a structured essay plans provides a number of advantages to you.

- It allows for reflection and peer assessment.
- It enables you to easily make significant changes to the content and the order of the essay, including adding and deleting information.
- It helps you to create clear lines between the title, the opening statements and the examples.
- It allows you to quickly define the points that you seek to make, leaving you the space you need to address the knowledge implications that the examples illustrate.

Essay plan

1. Prescribed title

Prescribed title
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write your prescribed title here.• Do not change the title in any way.• Make sure you stay focused on the knowledge questions raised in the title throughout (this is key to the rubric)

2. Introduction

a) Give your interpretation of the title
<p>Give an interesting response to the prescribed title. A quote related to the prescribed title and / or the areas of knowledge and ways of knowing is a good hook for the reader.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “I believe that this title is stating #.”• “It is my understanding that the prescribed title is asking me to investigate #.”• “The assumptions of the title are #.”• “The ideas in the title have interested me / thinker because #.”• “The idea that # is very interesting and I will #.”• “It can be argued that # applies in #, however, it can also be argued that it is

not true when looking at #.”

- “The main idea(s) I take from the prescribed title is #.”
- “I believe that the title is generating a debate in #.”
- “Ideas that we I have studied in relation to the prescribe title are #.”
- The (ideas in the) prescribed title reminded me of a quote be # because #.”

b) Definition of the key terms and concepts in the title

Define one or two of the key terms in the title.

Explain how you interpret the terms in the context of your essay.

- “For the purpose of this essay I will take “truth” to mean #.”
- “In this essay, I will use the following definition when discussing `evidence` #.”

c) Knowledge questions that are central to the discussion

- “Knowledge questions that will help me answer the prescribed title are #.”

d) Areas of knowledge and / or Ways of Knowing that will be central to the response

Most essays will ask you to respond to the prescribed title using two areas of knowledge (but be careful to read the demands of the prescribed title very carefully).

- “In this essay I will focus on the prescribed title through the areas of knowledge of (AOK or WOK), and (AOK or WOK).”
- “I will investigate (AOK or WOK) through comparing and contrasting (AOK or WOK) using the following areas of knowledge.”
- “I believe the topic of # can most efficiently be answered through (AOK or WOK) and (AOK or WOK) because #.”
- “The prescribed title can best be investigated through (AOK or WOK) and (AOK or WOK).”

- “The areas of knowledge I will use to investigate the prescribed title are (AOK or WOK) and (AOK or WOK) because #.”
- “My response to # can best be answered through comparing and contrasting (AOK or WOK) and (AOK or WOK) because #.”
- “(AOK or WOK) and (AOK or WOK) are the best areas of knowledge to respond to this prescribed title because #.”
- My experiences in (AOK or subject) and (AOK or subject) have influenced me to use them as the areas of knowledge when answering the prescribed title.”

e) State your thesis.

Give a short summary of your position (You might decide at the end of the essay that your initial thinking was wrong).

- “I agree with / that # based on #.”
- “I disagree with the quote in the title because #.”
- “I agree with the prescribed title from the point of view of # but will also argue that it can be disagreed with from the approach of #.”
- “I agree / disagree with the prescribed title with reservations. In this essay I will discuss the title from a variety of viewpoints, focusing on #.”
- “My initial response to the title is #.”
- “Although the title implies #, in this essay I will argue #.”
- “I mostly agree that # as I think #, but this is less true when looking at it from #.”

f) Road map

Give a sentence to what you are going to do in the main body of the essay. You can include the main areas of knowledge and ways of knowing that you will use in your essay. You can refer back to this throughout your essay to make sure you are keeping on track.

- “In this essay I will argue # from the point of view of (AOK or WOK) and then from the opinion of (AOK or WOK), leading to a conclusion that #.”
- “I will argue # is true from the point of view of (AOK or WOK) and will then discuss counterclaims focusing on (AOK or WOK).”
- “This essay will firstly investigate # from the point of view of (AOK or WOK) and then look at it from a variety of perspectives through (AOK or WOK).”
- “This essay will discuss # from the point of view of (AOK or WOK) and (AOK or WOK), investing claims and counterclaims based on (examples) #.”
- “I will seek to prove # in this essay through a discussion of # focusing on (AOK or WOK) and (AOK or WOK) #”.

3. Paragraph two: Your first claim and counterclaim

a) Claim	
Claim	<p>Give a topic sentence that outlines your argument related to the prescribed title.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In this paragraph I will argue that (link to prescribed title) is (make claim)”. • “It can be argued that (AOK or WOK) is # (link to prescribed title).” • “I (strongly) believe (AOK or WOK) is # (focus on a concept of the prescribed title).” • “My initial thoughts on (focus on a concept of the prescribed title) are #.” • “When considering (focus on a concept of the prescribed title) I accept # as being true” • “# has claimed that # is # (focus on a concept of the prescribed title).” • “When looking at (focus on a concept of the prescribed title), I believe #.” • “(focus on a concept of the prescribed title) is true from the point of view of (AOK / WOK).

Explain	<p>Elaborate and clarify your claim</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This means that #.” • “We can be confident that #.” • “From this, I can state with confidence that #.” • “Consequently #.” • “As a result #.” • “A result of #, is #.” • “Therefore #.” • “It logically follows that #.” • “Taking # into consideration, I am confident in stating #.”
Example	<p>Give a real life example to clarify and support the claim. This can come from your own experience as a knower. Examples should be specific, precise, and real.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In (AOK) we learnt that # which can be used as evidence to show #.” • “In my (AOK) IA I researched # and found #, this indicates #.” • “Our experiment in (AOK) revealed #.” • “In his / her work on #, (person`s name) found #” • “In (AOK) we learnt # through (WOK) which shows #. • “(person`s name)`s work in (AOK) shows us #” • “(person`s name)`s work in (AOK) leads me to believe # because #” • “(person`s name)`s ideas on (AOK) are a good example of # • “(person`s name)`s thoughts on # can lead us to believe #.” • “(quote / example) suggests that # is true.”

b) Counter-claim	
Counter-claim	<p>Give an argument against the claim you have made above.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “However, it can be argued that #.” • “Conversely #.” • “On the other hand #.”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “A different perspective comes from #.” • “Alternatively, it can be argued that” • “A different perspective on # is #” • “A challenge to the claim above is #.”
Example	<p>Use real life examples to back up your counter-claims.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “My work in (AOK) adds doubt to the claim that # because #” • “Although # is true through my experience in (AOK / WOK) it does not have the same affect / result when looking at it through the experience I had in (AOK / WOK)” • “The claim that # is true can be seen differently through the examples of (AOK / WOK) • “Although it can be argued # through (AOK / WOK) a different result can be seen through #.” • “Although #, to is possible to argue # through the perspective of “(person`s name)`s work in #.” • “(person`s name)`s work / ideas on # is an effective counterargument to # because.” • “(person`s name)`s work / ideas on adds doubt to the claim that #, because #” • “# people may disagree with my initial claim through their experiences in (AOK / WOK) because #”

c) Link to the prescribed title	
Link to prescribed title	<p>Make sure that you show how your claims and mini conclusions relate to the prescribed title throughout. The assessment rubric calls for a “sustained focus on the knowledge questions related to the prescribed title”.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It is therefore clear that (highlight concepts in prescribed title) #.”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The examples I have discussed show (concept in prescribed title) #.” • “Through an investigation of # and # my opinion of (concept in prescribed title) through (AOK / WOK) and (AOK / WOK) is #.”
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4. Paragraph three and four

Repeat the steps in paragraph two for paragraphs three and four.

5. Conclusion

Conclusion	<p>Relate your findings and insights back to the main ideas you took from the prescribed title. Make sure you have directly answered the question and your conclusion is consistent with your arguments in the main part of the essay.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In conclusion #.” • “Looking back at the prescribed title I conclude that #.” • “As result of my discussion I conclude that #” • “The most important factor in answering the prescribed title is #” • “It is clear that #” • “An implication of my conclusion is #.”
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References:

Information from this article is taken from

1. The IBO TOK Teacher Support
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2. <https://www.ibmastery.com/blog/how-to-structure-a-theory-of-knowledge-essay>
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