

## II. THE ESSAY

The other way you demonstrate your learning in TOK is by writing an essay, in response to one of six prescribed titles (PTs) issued by the IB each year. Unlike creating an exhibition, extended writing tasks are something you will be familiar with. And yet there are some differences between the TOK essay and other essays or long written tasks. An effective TOK essay is an exploration of TOK concepts and ideas, through the development and articulation of arguments, supported by real examples representing a diversity of perspectives, and consolidated into a conclusion that is of consequence. The essay is an opportunity to demonstrate that **knowledge matters** in the world, and has significant implications and consequences.

All PTs published by the IB will be in the form of *knowledge questions*, which we discussed earlier in this chapter. A worthy reminder here, however, is regarding the *contestability* of knowledge questions—they will by definition be open to a multiplicity of possible good answers. But to say that there is no right or wrong answer to a knowledge question is not the same as to say there are no *poor* answers to a knowledge question. The TOK essay task asks for an exploration of the knowledge question contained within the PT, but also asks for this to be done clearly and critically.

1. First, together with your teacher or as a class, you will discuss the list of PTs.
2. Next, you should have an opportunity to share with your teacher your ideas about how you are planning to explore your chosen PT.
3. Based on this discussion and your teacher's feedback, you will proceed to write a draft of the essay.
4. Your teacher will read your draft and comment with suggestions on how it can be improved, and you will get an opportunity to act on these comments and incorporate the feedback.
5. Finally, you will hand over a final version of your essay for submission to the IB.

In the following pages, we walk through different elements in the thinking and writing process for the essay and offer some essential guidance on moving through them while avoiding some of the most common pitfalls.

We address perhaps the biggest pitfall of all here at the start: you will notice that at no point in the process does it say “visit one of the many TOK help websites online” or “google your PT word for word”. Whatever you do,

do not let the internet be the first place you go to start thinking about your essay. There is a lot of material online specific to the TOK essay, designed to “help” with the task, and the advice you find there can be poor, misleading or outdated. Some websites even prey on students’ insecurities and charge for their “service”. If you have worked through this book, you know what you need to know to tackle the essay. Have confidence in that knowledge and in your ability to think independently. No website can

give you that confidence. In fact, the model responses, templates and suggested examples take something away from you that is far more important: your unique, individual approach to the questions. Teachers have been warning students about this for years and we hope that you will trust us, and trust yourself. Provide yourself with time and space to think and reflect critically, honour your knowledge and experience—it is enough—and let the essay be a celebration of what you have learned in TOK.

Before we dive in, here is an overview of the requirements of the task.

- The essay has to be written on a **single PT** from the examination session that you are registered in. You may not write your own title or alter a PT in any way. Your essay should be a full and direct response to the PT, which should be clearly stated at the top of your essay.
- The word limit for the essay is **1600 words**. The examiner is not required to read anything over this word limit. An essay that is significantly under the word limit is self-penalizing and unlikely to be a fully developed response to the PT.
- There is no prescribed structure for the essay.

- The TOK essay is not primarily a research task. You are not expected to do a review of the literature or find out what everyone before you has said on the topic. That said, whenever you refer to someone else’s words or ideas, you must cite the source. If you have questions or need further guidance about what and how to cite, ask your teacher.
- The essay should be **formatted** in a standard font (such as Arial) in 12 pt, and double spaced throughout. No cover page or other special formatting is necessary.
- No identifying information, such as your name or candidate number, should appear in the essay document. The script should be **anonymous** in order to support the impartiality of the marking.

## II.1 Unpacking the PT

When you first see the list of PTs, much like the TOK exhibition prompts, they might strike you as very abstract and conceptual. Unpacking them—identifying the TOK concepts and key words—is something you will want to do for all PTs to some extent. This process will help you clarify your understanding of what each PT is asking and how you might approach answering it; also, which is the one you wish to explore further. However, endlessly unpacking PTs can turn into a form of procrastination.

We emphasize unpacking PTs here because this is the first step in ensuring a sustained discussion of knowledge in your essay. It helps you identify what it is that you should maintain focus on as you begin to write. Failure to do this can mean that you launch into your essay with an inaccurate interpretation of the demands of the question. The connection of your essay to the PT is one of the aspects that is assessed, and this needs to be clear to you in order to be clear in your writing. Let’s practise unpacking one of the prescribed PTs.

Consider this PT from May 2016.

**“To what extent do the concepts that we use shape the conclusions that we reach?”**

A good place to start is to pay attention to the **requirements in the PT**. Some PTs will specify an AOK to be discussed, or the number of AOKs you must explore in the essay. Follow these requirements closely; your response must address the PT fully in order to be effective. If the PT calls for two AOKs, including a third and a fourth is seen as taking attention and words away from offering a deeper analysis of the two that were required. This particular PT leaves that open—you can technically discuss any number of AOKs, as long as you consider different perspectives.

The **key terms** that stand out are “concepts” and “conclusions”. Having an understanding of these terms, and offering a discussion around them will be crucial to an effective response. This is where students sometimes turn to dictionary definitions. This is ineffective and strongly discouraged for a reason—unless you are specifically discussing the formation of definitions as a knowledge issue, it is mostly unhelpful to rely on and include dictionary definitions of key terms in your TOK essay. Instead consider what *concepts* look like in different AOKs, starting perhaps with the concepts you have encountered in your subjects. Are these concepts generally accepted, or disputed among practitioners in the AOK they belong to? What are the relationships between concepts and theories, schools of thought or ideologies? And what kind of conclusions do the different AOKs seek to reach? Are concepts necessary and useful for being able to reach conclusions in these AOKs? Think about questions like these early and you will be well placed to develop a strong essay.

Note also that this PT asks a **question of extent**; this type of question is common in PTs.

You can be given a statement or quote and asked about the extent to which you agree with it, or the extent to which this is the case in a number of AOKs. This specific PT asks about the extent of the influence of concepts on conclusions, and offers the term “shape” to describe that influence. You should evaluate the extent of the shaping influence of concepts on conclusions throughout your essay.

And then there is the word “we”—very easy to overlook, and yet critical to an effective response. In a PT, always look for the **knower or community of knowers** that is being referred to. Is it mathematicians, historians, experts, scientists, or is it—as is the case in this PT—an unspecified “we”? “We” should not be taken as an invitation to write an essay about a general group of unspecific knowers, as if such a group even existed. Instead, it should be seen as an opportunity to explore different knowers. For instance, does the influence of concepts on conclusions differ for experts versus non-experts? Is it more significant in one AOK as opposed to another?

It is important to flag that you must **make sure not to alter the PT** in the process of unpacking it, and to respond to it exactly as it was presented. Brainstorming a few questions in relation to the PT can be helpful to identify in which directions to take your response, but these questions must not displace the PT. In the case of this PT you might consider whether it is possible to reach different conclusions by using the same concepts, or the same conclusion by using different concepts. As you begin writing, always check that your discussion is related to what the PT is asking for and that you are giving adequate attention to all the key terms in the PT.

Following this sequence, try unpacking a few—or all—of the PTs in your session. If you are doing this for practice before they become available, try one of the PTs in the sections below, or a different one provided by your teacher.

Finally, unpacking the PT is something you do *both* as a step in the process of thinking about your essay and in the writing of your essay. An effective introduction will include your understanding of what the question is asking for as well as your plan for how you are going to approach and explore it. Meaningfully unpacking the prescribed title is a critical first step in structuring the argumentative arc of your response.

## II.2 Articulating arguments and supporting them with examples

Once you have a good understanding of the prescribed title and what it asks for, it is time to articulate a few arguments in response, and start thinking about what kind of evidence you can offer in support. Note here that the way you advance your response in writing does not need to follow your thinking process—will you lead with your examples, or with your arguments? Either

is fine for the purposes of the TOK essay, and the structure of your essay should be able to adapt to the type of prescribed title you have chosen.

In fact, conforming your essay to a strict structure of claim-counterclaim or example-counterexample can lead to generalizations, arbitrary distinctions, misrepresentations and false dichotomies. Exploring a range of evidence, from within and across AOKs, allows you to offer some nuance and honour the complexity and messiness of knowledge in the real world. It is essential that your examples are grounded in the real world, that they refer to how actual practitioners and students of different disciplines gain and share knowledge. Hypothetical and speculative examples, as well as anecdotal ones that are impossible to verify, are therefore rarely effective. The kind of support you offer for your arguments should reflect what you have learned in this course about what makes for good evidence.

Consider how you might construct a response to this PT from May 2016.

**“In knowledge there is always a trade-off between accuracy and simplicity.” Evaluate this statement in relation to two areas of knowledge.**

There is a lot in this PT that requires careful unpacking. For example, the title says “in knowledge”, without identifying a specific process or context. You may choose to respond to this title by exploring how the trade-off between accuracy and simplicity manifests in the context of 1) the production and 2) the transfer of knowledge in two AOKs. Before we continue, it is important to note that when a PT calls for a discussion of the *production* of knowledge, then it is appropriate to focus specifically on the activities of specialists and experts in the AOKs.

In the first part of your essay you can explore the alleged inverse relationship between accuracy and simplicity in how knowledge is produced in two AOKs. Combinations of mathematical proof and natural laws, models of economic and biological processes, scientific and political theories, historical narratives and art performances can be invoked here to explore the accuracy and simplicity in knowledge production.

Here are some **pitfalls to avoid**.

- It is not uncommon for students to opportunistically choose AOKs that seem to give opposing answers to the question at hand. This can result in arguments that one thing happens in one AOK and exactly the opposite happens in the other. These arguments tend to be supported by oversimplified examples, that misrepresent the AOKs as monoliths.

- Another weak approach is to offer arguments both in favour and against the title, in both AOKs, effectively concluding nothing. This “both-sides-of-the-story” approach sounds as if you are doing TOK—but without evaluating the relative merits of the arguments in context, there is not much to say at the end.
- Another pitfall is to hang onto a strong word in the PT, such as “always”, and argue that while there may be a trade-off between accuracy and simplicity, this is not *always* the case in your chosen AOKs. This approach can be limiting if you only offer a counterexample and leave it at that. However, if you can offer some discussion or analysis of the counterexample this approach may still be successful.

In the example of this prescribed title, you can **make a more nuanced argument**, such as that the relationship between accuracy

and simplicity in one or both of your AOKs is best described as something other than a trade-off. You can then give examples of the specific conditions of the production of knowledge in your AOKs, and how they affect the relationship between accuracy and simplicity.

In the second part of the essay you may turn to the transfer of knowledge in the same two AOKs. Throughout this book we discuss examples of the distortions that arise when knowledge is simplified for the purpose of education—for example in the way it is presented in textbooks. You might recall examples from genetics (Chapter 7), history (Chapter 9) or economics (Chapter 8). You may argue that this trade-off is inevitable in order for the transfer of knowledge to work, and examine the effect—positive or negative—of sacrificing some degree of accuracy for simplicity.

### II.3 Engaging with a diversity of perspectives and evaluating differences

In the TOK essay you will need to demonstrate awareness of multiple points of view, as well as an ability to evaluate them. These different points of view can come from various perspectives. On a big-picture level, there are the perspectives of the different AOKs—the arts, the human and natural sciences, history and mathematics. Within each AOK there are different fields or disciplines, and within each of the disciplines there are subdisciplines and schools of thought. Even within a single subdiscipline there can be a multiplicity of perspectives—claims made by a variety of claims-makers. For example, in the visual arts we can have the perspective of the artist, the art critic, the student of art, the curator, the art collector, the audience and so on.

Your awareness of different perspectives is reflected through the selection of points of view that you include in your essay. But more important than just having them represented is what you do with the different perspectives—what kind of analysis and evaluation can you offer? One thing that is often overlooked by students in such analyses is that the similarities among disciplines and AOKs are as interesting as the differences. When we encounter similarities between two academic fields, about what counts as evidence or what it means to give an explanation, it is important to pause and consider not only what makes AOKs different, but also how they are similar in the ways they produce, share and apply knowledge.

And whenever we focus on the differences, as we so often do in TOK, it is important to ask: where do these differences come from? How come reliability and accuracy take on

different meanings in different AOKs? Does the legitimacy of experts come from different sources in different AOKs? It is not enough by way of TOK analysis to say that different things happen in mathematics and history because they are different AOKs; that is obvious. What can you say about the source of

their differences and, as we mentioned earlier, similarities? Even if it is difficult to articulate, it is still worth thinking about why it is that we have these different ways of coming to know about the world. Let's see what this looks like in practice.

Consider how you might engage with and evaluate different points of view in this PT from the May 2015 session.

**"There is no reason why we cannot link facts and theories across disciplines and create a common groundwork of explanation."**  
**To what extent do you agree with this statement?**

You might notice that the title contains the tricky word "we", and we discussed earlier why it is important and necessary to specify whom it is referring to. In this specific title, you can choose to answer the question with reference to, for example, 1) experts and researchers who produce knowledge, 2) teachers and communicators who disseminate knowledge, or 3) students and individuals who acquire and make sense of knowledge. Each of these groups of knowers, and subgroups, are likely to have different reasons for why we can or cannot "create a common groundwork of explanation". Notice how **in specifying the key term "we" you are inviting different perspectives** into your essay. This is an important step towards being able to draw

a meaningful conclusion; the better you do this the more convincing the outcome of your analysis will be. In what context and at what level are you going to explore the linking of facts and theories?

This PT in itself deals with multiple perspectives—the various points of view that exist across disciplines. Consider in which ways linking facts and theories across disciplines from the same AOK (economics, anthropology and psychology, for example) might differ from doing the same across history and mathematics. In your essay you should **demonstrate awareness of the similarities and differences between and within AOKs, as well as the source of those similarities and differences**. What might be the source? Consider what role having a similar set of methods and tools, or having a shared set of assumptions, plays in this PT.

The main pitfall you are going to want to avoid here is generalizing perspectives at the level of AOKs, uncritically presenting disciplines as monoliths; for example, "in the arts we see X, while in the sciences we see Y."

Something else to keep in mind is that in an essay a raft of rhetorical questions is not a substitute for analysis. Your analysis might raise more questions than it answers, but it must answer some.

## II.4 Drawing conclusions that are of consequence

If you have done the work we talked about so far, by this point you should be well placed to

conclude your essay meaningfully. Below we discuss what that could look like.

The conclusions should leave the reader—and you—with a sense of having got somewhere at the end of your essay. In other words, we should not be back exactly where we started, having come full circle, to conclude that "it depends" or that it is true "to some extent". We knew that already, and 1600 words later, ideally we would know a bit more. By the time you

need to present the conclusion, you should be able to say something about what it depends on, what the circumstances are, which factors affect it and why we should care about any of it.

And so, if you remember one thing about TOK essay conclusions, let it be this: **do not just give up the possibility of knowing**. Yes, we spend a lot of time and effort in TOK questioning the reliability and skill of those who produce knowledge; the legitimacy and trustworthiness of the institutions or persons who disseminate it; and our own ability to discern among multiple and often conflicting perspectives. So much so, it seems, that in the end students can be overwhelmed with the limitations and

challenges of knowing, with little to inspire confidence in knowledge. It can be tempting, from this standpoint, to conclude that since so much of knowledge is contestable, uncertain, incomplete and tentative that it is all relative, biased, unreliable and suspect. We hope that in your conclusion, and in what you take away from TOK, you can see both the difficulties of becoming knowledgeable and the achievement of having overcome them.

Like knowing, TOK is not easy, but it is not impossible either. It should certainly not be the kind of frustrating that makes it hard to appreciate why knowledge matters in the world. It matters too much to give it up.

Consider what you might conclude in response to this PT from May 2014.

**“That which is accepted as knowledge today is sometimes discarded tomorrow.” Consider knowledge issues raised by this statement in two areas of knowledge.**

It has the word “sometimes”—and it would be easy, but also underwhelming, to flatly conclude on the basis of your extensive exploration that yes, sometimes this or that can be the case; the end. This title also has another tricky word, “tomorrow”, that could well drag you into entirely speculative conclusions about what might happen to knowledge in different fields in the future. Hopefully you will have recognized both of these challenges with the title well in advance, and written an essay that discusses the second part of the prescribed title: the knowledge issues that arise from this statement in two AOKs.

A strong conclusion should demonstrate your ability to **extract meaning from the**

**different perspectives** you have explored. Consider: what have we learned from when and how knowledge has been discarded in the past? On what grounds was it discarded? What happens to discarded knowledge in your chosen AOKs? If there were significant or surprising similarities and differences between your AOKs—how can you explain these?

A strong conclusion also requires an **awareness of the implications** of the conclusion and the ability to **articulate a conclusion that is of consequence**. So, consider: what does the possibility of being discarded mean for the knowledge we have today and the confidence we have in it?

Note that we offer questions here to give you a sense of the kinds of ideas you can include in a conclusion. You can also offer some outstanding questions, but it is expected that you will attempt to answer them, and respond courageously—if provisionally—to the PT.

## II.5 Assessment for the TOK essay

Your examiner will refer to the rubric below to evaluate your essay. You too can refer to it in

the process of writing your essay to understand the criteria, self-assess and make sense of your teacher's feedback.

Does the student provide a clear, coherent and critical exploration of the essay title?					
Excellent 9–10	Good 7–8	Satisfactory 5–6	Basic 3–4	Rudimentary 1–2	0
The discussion has a sustained focus on the title and is linked effectively to areas of knowledge. Arguments are clear, coherent and effectively supported by specific examples. The implications of arguments are considered. There is clear awareness and evaluation of different points of view.	The discussion is focused on the title and is linked effectively to areas of knowledge. Arguments are clear, coherent and supported by examples. There is awareness and some evaluation of different points of view.	The discussion is focused on the title and is developed with some links to areas of knowledge. Arguments are offered and are supported by examples. There is some awareness of different points of view.	The discussion is connected to the title and makes superficial or limited links to areas of knowledge. The discussion is largely descriptive. Limited arguments are offered but they are unclear and are not supported by effective examples.	The discussion is weakly connected to the title. While there may be links to the areas of knowledge, any relevant points are descriptive or consist only of unsupported assertions.	The discussion does not reach the standard described by the other levels or is not a response to one of the prescribed titles for the correct assessment session.
Possible characteristics					
Insightful Convincing Accomplished Lucid	Pertinent Relevant Analytical Organized	Acceptable Mainstream Adequate Competent	Underdeveloped Basic Superficial Limited	Ineffective Descriptive Incoherent Formless	