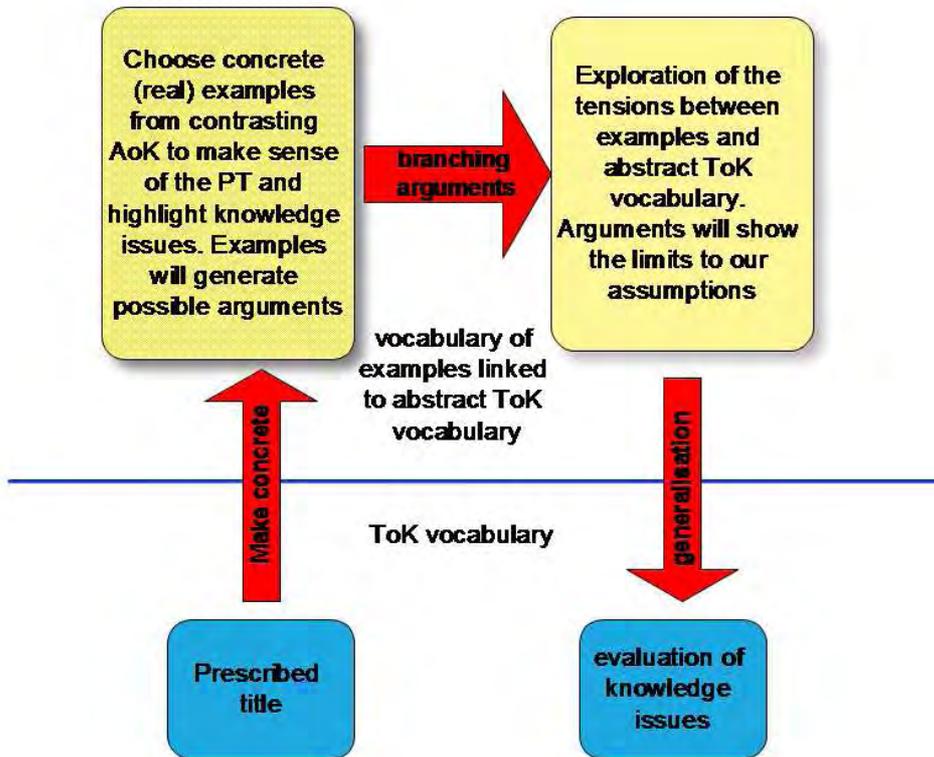


The structure and vocabulary of a ToK Essay



Tips for writing a good ToK Essay

While there is no standard formula for approaching a ToK essay the following advice may well be helpful.

1. Familiarise yourself with the assessment criteria.

Read the criteria and understand what is meant by the paragraphs at the top of each. Try reading a ToK essay (preferably by someone else) from the point of view of the examiner. Give it a score for each criterion. Remember that it is 'best fit' marking. Find the description that fits the essay best for each criterion. Imagine giving advice to the author of the essay. What improvements would you suggest?

2. Find a 'Knowledge Issue' in the title.

Quite often knowledge issues deal in uncertainty. For example the evidence for a knowledge claim might leave open the possibility that the claim may be false. Or there may be a problem of *induction* or justification. There might be questions of subjectivity and objectivity that have to be addressed. These KI's form the centre of a ToK essay. If you don't think that the title suggests anything problematic or controversial about knowledge then perhaps you should look at a different title.

3. Brainstorm and plan the essay before writing it.

A useful model to use here might be:

1. Brainstorm the title - draw a mind map. What is the knowledge issue? (20 mins)
2. Find examples that illustrate the KI - try to use real examples if possible. It is a good idea to have a couple of in-depth examples taken from contrasting areas of knowledge. (20 mins)
3. Identify important concepts to introduce in order to understand these examples - don't use dictionary definitions. Illustrate your definitions with (short) examples. (10 mins)
4. Identify two (or more) sides to the controversy or positions regarding the KI (10 mins)
5. Find arguments that support each position or side to the controversy (20 mins)
6. Evaluate these arguments (look for their strengths and weaknesses) – which seems more plausible on balance? (10 mins)
7. Are there any assumptions that underlie the different arguments in 6? Are there any assumptions underlying your whole analysis? Can you identify them? (for example your own perspective: gender, age, philosophy, ethnic or cultural background, religion, manner of

upbringing and so on). (10 mins)

8. Write an essay plan: (plan what you want to say in each paragraph, an essay should have (at least) an introduction, a body and a conclusion. (20 mins)
9. Write the essay. (2 hours)

Total time taken 4 hours. This is a conservative estimate. It might be possible to complete some of the stages more quickly. It is probably a good idea to do the brainstorming and then let it rest for a while. On returning to the essay one can sometimes see things in a different light.

4. Clarity

Try to think clearly and write clearly. Try to avoid using complicated language if you can. TOK Examiners like precise language so make it crystal clear what you mean when you use a term. Make sure that key words such as 'subjective', 'belief' or 'emotion' are illustrated by small examples to help the Examiner understand what you mean. Try to develop an 'abstract' for your essay. A short summary of your argument (one paragraph, say) on a separate sheet will help you keep track of your thinking. You might want to change the abstract as you progress in your thinking.

5. Knowledge Issues.

Make sure that your essay is always focussed on the knowledge issues you have identified in the essay title. Every paragraph should contain a link back to the question or the KI's you identified in the introduction.

6. Areas of Knowledge.

Many TOK titles refer to different Areas of Knowledge such as the Natural Sciences or Mathematics. Make sure that any discussion of these AoK's answers the question "What is special about say Mathematics that is not special about the other disciplines?" It should not be possible to substitute another AoK in a statement you have made and still get a true statement. For example if you have written about Mathematics it should not be possible to substitute "The Arts" and still get true statements.

7. Examples.

Try to use real examples wherever possible. Good sources of examples can be found in your school subjects, your own life, topical issues in magazines or newspapers or on the internet. Try to ensure that your examples are taken from a variety of sources and do not make implicit cultural assumptions. Make sure that you tell the reader what the example is supposed to illustrate. What is it an example of?

8. What to put in the introduction.

Make sure the key concepts you use are discussed in the introduction along with a statement of the KI (s) and a brief statement of your position. You should give the reader some helpful signposts here about how you will deal with the issues raised in the title.

9. What to put in the Body of the Essay.

The arguments and main examples should appear in the body of the essay. Here you should give some detailed support for your position. Then there should be some anticipation of possible weaknesses in, or objections to, your position. This might include possible counterclaims. These should be thoroughly evaluated. You should not just leave them hanging – this implies inconsistency: why would you hold the position you do if there are perfectly valid arguments against it? Make sure that the reasoning you employ is valid and that all statements are supported. While the position you take in the essay might be your own opinion this does not make it true. You should give arguments to show why you are warranted to assert what you do. There should be an evaluation given of the main thesis of the essay in the light of the discussion of possible alternative positions.

10. What to put in the Conclusion.

The conclusion should state an evaluation of the arguments presented and the implications of this. There should be an answer to the question "So what?". For example you could end with a 'forward looking view' or give a brief outline on how the discussion in the essay is significant and might have implications in related areas.

11. General Sense of Progress in the Essay

There should be a sense in which the essay moves the argument on. The reader should come out of reading the essay with a clear feeling that something has been accomplished and that the essay has shed some light on its subject matter. This does not mean that the essay has arrived at a definitive answer to the question but rather that some possible answers appear to be more likely than others – that serious examination and evaluation of the alternatives has taken place. The move from *Problems of Knowledge* to *Knowledge Issues* implies that it is no longer sufficient to identify or point out problems in knowledge and its acquisition. Rather the student should treat the issues she has identified and evaluate their validity, importance, effect on limiting the scope or degree of certainty of knowledge claims.

12. Perspectives

Show an awareness of possible other perspectives upon the subject matter of the essay. Is there an alternative way of looking at things from the point of view of other gender, life experience, culture, socio-economic class, education or geography? How sensitive are your arguments to these other perspectives? Are the concepts you are treating in the essay particular to one or other perspective? Try to examine your own starting point. Do you bring a specific perspective to bear on the argument? Try to think outside the box comprising your own geographical location, upbringing, gender, culture, philosophical tradition, demographic and language.

13. Things to avoid:

1. General meaningless statements such as "Since the dawn of time man has been obsessed with knowledge". The essay does not need a romantic lead-in. You can start it straight away. Like a film the first paragraph should be packed with ToK action.
2. Gross unsubstantiated generalisations such as: "Americans see wealth itself as a moral good". Be very careful with the use of the word *all*. Check carefully what it is you want to say. Ask yourself whether it is necessary for your essay to make such a sweeping statement?
3. Pseudoexamples. These are fictional examples usually based on stereotyping: "An Israeli would regard the wall as necessary while a Palestian as an infringement of basic liberty". In such as situation find a statement by a real Israeli and a real Palestinian. Worse are examples which typecast Areas of Knowledge: "A scientist would look at the statue and try to work out the forces in it while an artist would react emotionally to it". The reaction of most examiners reading these lines is to write in red pen: "Would they?" and knock off some points under category A,B or C or combinations of these depending on the context.
4. Dictionary definitions. These are usually not at all helpful in clarifying ToK concepts. These are best dealt with in your own terms. What do you understand as knowledge as opposed to belief, subjective versus objective, inference as opposed to deduction? It is often useful to see a concept in comparison with another related concept and think of examples of one that are not examples of the other. Small examples that illustrate the way in which you see concepts are very useful. On the whole avoid being 'bogged down' by definitions. If one had to define Art before writing any essay on it then one would hardly get anywhere at all.
5. Be careful with examples or ideas taken from textbooks – especially those designed specifically for ToK. Textbooks used in a authoritative way without critical evaluation often lead to poor ToK essays. The examiners are interested in what *you* have to say not the author of a textbook. If you use a textbook make sure you stand back and look critically at what is said. Do you agree with the author or not? If you do can you imagine possible counterarguments. Make sure that you commentate upon any such sources you use in the essay. Just because a source backs up your argument that does not mean that you have no further work to do.
6. Don't overstate contentious issues. I have often seen the statement "Artists use their artwork to express their emotions" in ToK essays. This is at the very least contestable – it could be downright false. In the history of art perhaps only the expressionists ever admitted to this. What might be meant is that "there is an emotional component to many (though by no means all) artworks". Be prepared to refine the statements that you make in the essay. It should, after all, contain only true statements.
7. Steer clear of lines of argument that go: "human beings are all different therefore we all have different (ways of looking at things) (truths) (emotions) (experiences) (thoughts) (moral systems) (notions of what is beautiful) (beliefs) ... There are three objections to this type of statement. The conclusion almost certainly doesn't follow

from the premise, the conclusion is almost certainly false and the factual premise might also be false (at least in non-trivial or substantial way).

8. Steer well clear of identifying a problem of knowledge and then concluding that we can't know anything (in a particular area of knowledge). This is almost certainly not true. Try to explore the nature of the problem you have found and evaluate its effect upon the area of knowledge in question. It might only have the effect of weakening certain knowledge claims or limiting their scope or applicability.

9. Don't be a 'lazy sceptic' or an 'unthinking relativist'. (follows from 8 above). Try a more sophisticated approach or more refined type of thinking.

Good luck!

Ric Sims June 2009.