TOK THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Top ten tips for your TOK essay

IB Diploma students all over the world are facing the pending deadline of the TOK essay. TOK is not simply about assessment, but this doesn't mean that you shouldn't think strategically about the process and leverage the opportunities for success. **John Sprague** offers some strategies to make the most of the experience

1 Start early

While the TOK essay is a relatively short piece of work, don't let this lull you into thinking that it is easy. Your first ideas are rarely the best — let them develop over time.

2 Writing to think…

Know the difference between *writing to think* and *writing to communicate*. All too often students assume that thinking and communicating are the same process. When developing a presentation, do you open up PowerPoint before you even know what you are going to say? When writing an essay, do you start with a blank page and think 'what is my introduction going to be?'

The effort that goes into developing your ideas is different from the subsequent effort that goes into shaping the essay that will be assessed. Both require writing, but that doesn't mean they are the same activity.

Have you ever got to the end of an essay and suddenly thought, 'there's a good idea, why didn't I think of that three pages ago?' If you're anything like me, jotting down your ideas will help you clarify them while writing. You can't present your ideas until you know what they are, but sometimes you don't know what they are when it is time to start working. To develop ideas I usually need to start writing about a topic on which I am knowledgeable, saving the things I'm not sure about until later. I just need to break through the 'writers' block' and start putting words on paper. I don't have to decide where it will go in the final essay, or how it fits into the larger picture, until I have the other ideas ready to go.

3. …or writing to communicate?

Keeping this division is crucial. Once you have written your ideas down and reached that 'aha!' moment, you can go back and shift ideas around. You can easily answer the question 'What needs to go into my introduction' because you should have the answer among your ideas in front of you.

Try using your word processor's 'Outline' function (which you can usually find under the 'View' menu) to organise your notes. It allows you to break up ideas into easy headings and text paragraphs, hide them when you're done with that part, and expand them later when you need to. It also allows you to move ideas around when you need to start thinking about the most effective order.

When it comes to communicating, you can start to link the ideas together, perhaps cutting out the headings and offering fluid transitions between ideas (though headings can still be appropriate).



4 Brainstorm each title

Don't commit yourself to any one title until you have had a chance to explore them all. Use a mind map to dig into the title, thinking about what examples to use, what the command terms are asking you to do, and what areas of knowledge and ways of knowing (WOKs) might be helpful. The title you thought was going to be easy might turn out to be difficult, or vice versa.

5 Remember the examiner

Your examiner is a real, living, breathing human being, and a happy examiner is a charitable examiner:

- Examiners read the essays on a computer, so format your essay so it is easier to read on screen. Use 12-point font, normal-sized margins and double spacing.
- Don't be afraid to tell the examiner what you are doing in the essay. Phrases like 'A counter claim that I will now examine is…' or 'Having established this point, I can now use it to develop my argument by…' might be clunky in terms of style but they help the examiner follow the process clearly.
- Since you don't know what your examiner's academic specialty is, think about whether your argument and examples will be convincing to someone who teaches that subject. Talk to another teacher about your ideas to see if they think they are rigorous enough (though only your TOK teacher can read your draft essay).

6 Use examples well

Examples are the real driving force of a good TOK essay. Without them your essay will just float around in the world of abstraction. Your ideas might be true, but you need to prove that they are through analysis of real-life, concrete examples.

Never use hypothetical examples — TOK is about knowledge in the real world. Make sure that you analyse the examples well — don't just *identify* an example, tell the examiner *why* it's a good example, what it shows and how it shows it. Your examiner might know a lot about your topic (or nothing at all), so you need to make the examples convincing.

Avoid obvious examples. People have known the Earth was round since the sixth century BCE. Galileo certainly had his troubles with the church, but this will be pointed out by thousands of other students. Search for examples that others might not have thought of.

7 Develop a clear argument

The biggest single drawback of most of the hundreds of essays I examine each year is that they don't have a clear argument. They are more accounts of everything the student knows about the topic than essays. Your essay needs to take a position that is a clear response to the title, not just a list of ideas that occurred to you during the process of writing.

8 Reference properly

The TOK essay is not a research project, so you don't need to spend hours in the library, but it is still a piece of academic writing. An effective argument is presented responsibly and this includes full, properly formatted referencing. If the examiner thinks you have referenced something incorrectly (or not at all), they can just open up a web browser and look for themselves. Good referencing shows them that you are paying attention to detail, and essays that pay attention to detail are generally good essays.

9 Show your teacher

Teachers can only look through an essay once, and they are not allowed to edit it line by line, but they can give you a sense of whether you are on the right track and have a discussion with you about the ideas you have presented.

10 Remember the assessment criteria

Read through the assessment criteria for the essay and keep them to hand while you are writing. Remember points 2 and 3 above: present your ideas in a way that meets the requirements of the criteria.

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