

The knowledge frameworks are a valuable tool when it comes to making sense of how knowledge works within a particular AOK. The five elements of the knowledge framework are a way of exploring how knowledge functions quite differently in some cases depending on the area you are looking at.

You might, for example, be exploring the objectivity of mathematics and the sciences. Using the knowledge framework elements of 'Scope and applications' and 'Methodology' will give you the opportunity to ask different sorts of questions and uncover different answers. For example, you might explore how the scientific method is an attempt to build an objective stance in the sciences, whereas the objectivity of pure mathematics might come more from its scope as a discipline about universal rational principles. So saying 'Mathematics and sciences are objective' is true on a superficial and far too general level, but you can use the knowledge frameworks to explore far more sophisticated ideas and approaches.

### ■ Counter-claims

One of the hallmarks of an effective and convincing evaluation or analysis is the identification and exploration of positions counter to what the essay is arguing. Again, this emphasises the importance of actually having a position or a clear idea of what it is that you think. One way of exploring these counter-claims is by asking, 'If someone disagreed with me, what would they say?' Being able to convincingly articulate this disagreement is key – you want to present counter-claims and counter-arguments in a way that suggests they are good objections. Many students commit the straw man fallacy here when they don't give a convincing explanation of the counter-position.

Identification of a counter-claim or argument is not enough however. The best essays will then reply to that position. You don't want to have only a counter-argument as it may actually be quite convincing to the reader and weaken the effectiveness of your own argument. Once you have outlined the counter-position you should do your best to explain why it is that you still hold on to your own position, even when a viable alternative is available. Yes, that is a counter-position, but why don't you believe it?

This is really the point at which analysis becomes evaluation. Every position has strengths and weaknesses and pointing them out and discussing them is good analysis. But once you engage with those strengths and weaknesses and use them to explore your own position, or explain why the strengths of the counter-position still are not enough to make you change your mind, this is when your analysis becomes evaluation.

These counter-positions can be presented one by one, in a point / counter-point process, or you can present the counter-argument in its own section. The danger with the first method is that the essay tends to read like a tennis match and with all the positions being swatted back and forth, it can become a challenge for the student to maintain a clear narrative through the essay. The second method, however, requires a sophisticated understanding of the main point and means that the counter-position has to be a counter to this main position: 'Overall my position is this ...', so a counter-position would be a larger, more general counter-claim and this can be a challenge for students.

### ■ Counter-claim vs counter-argument

Whatever method you choose, it is worth keeping in mind the difference between 'counter-claims' and 'counter-arguments'. Counter-claims are individual claims that run counter to claims you are making. An example would be:

**Claim:** The human sciences can create questions that are neutral.

**Counter-claim:** The human sciences cannot create questions that are neutral.

Counter-arguments, however, are far more complex and require a much better understanding of the material and ideas. The counter-argument will not be formulated in a simple for / against structure, but will require a genuine exploration of an issue in a way that results in a final well-supported position which runs counter to your initial position.

So, for the example above, the counter-argument would require a fuller analysis of the nature of the human sciences, the methods they use, their objects and aims. Proper handling of a counter-argument therefore might require a separate section of the essay and will need to be properly crafted and understood prior to committing it finally to paper. These sorts of responses where the counter-argument is presented and replied to convincingly tend to be the types of things that the best essays can do well.

### ■ Evidence of personal approach

Showing a personal approach is integral to a good TOK essay. The distinction between personal knowledge and shared knowledge was one attempt to help students approach this issue of the 'knowers' perspective' or the 'personal approach' in a way that avoided the common approach of offering anecdotes about knowledge. Still, this is sometimes a challenging thing to do well.

You are encouraged to draw on your own experience as knowers, and this will certainly give your essays a personal tone. When using your own experience, you will want to make sure that your anecdotes don't become the focus of the essay, however. Just like in the presentation, the specific examples used in your essay should be developed in terms of the more general or decontextualised questions about knowledge that they are meant to raise. Any failed experiments in chemistry, or individual research for your history Extended Essay, or explorations that you conducted in your mathematics class must point to some 'decontextualised' knowledge question that you are exploring. An essay full of anecdotes is unlikely to do well.

In a good introductory paragraph, explore a handful of well-developed examples (even though they might not have anything to do with you, personally) or offer unexpected conclusions. The presumption that ethics is more subjective than mathematics, for example, will come as a surprise to no one, but the student who emphasises the subjectivity within mathematics, or makes some attempt to explore the objective side of ethics will immediately raise the interest levels of the examiner.

### ■ Be very wary of 'help' websites

Every year there are more and more online TOK 'help' websites which promise advice on how to proceed with the particular essay titles. It is not at all certain, however, that these sites give out consistently good advice. The IB takes plagiarism very seriously and

is well aware of the sites and the type of advice they give. If they identify an essay which is clearly not the work of the student, that student runs the risk of falling foul of the academic malpractice rules and might lose his or her entire diploma. This is not a risk worth taking.

The best sources of advice and guidance are your teachers. They have the experience, can identify useful resources and will help you to negotiate the troublesome issue of using sources appropriately. They are also professionally obligated to help you develop your own ideas and they take this obligation seriously: they won't write your essay for you!

Examiners are trained to identify where students are succeeding and to award points accordingly, so even when a student is genuinely struggling, but nevertheless making an honest effort in the essay, that student can do well against the criteria. If, however, the student struggles and uses information inappropriately, this may constitute malpractice and could be punished with a loss of the entire diploma.

Help websites come in a variety of types. Some are general TOK sites whose content is designed to help you develop as TOK students, not to give you answers to specific titles or tell you the 'right' ideas. These sites are less harmful and pose no more or less of a worry than any TOK textbook. If you use ideas from these sites, just be sure to reference them and use them wisely.

Some sites, however, promise to 'unpack' the titles for you or work on your essays or ideas with you for a fee. These can be more problematic as they might have their own commercial desires at heart over your own learning or success.

My advice is simply to make the best use of your own teachers or, whenever in doubt, ask your teachers about advice from a website. Follow your teacher's lead when it comes to unpacking ideas and exploring strategies and go to your own teacher if you are struggling. They know you and they have the experience you can trust. Think of faith as a way of knowing ... in whom should you be placing your trust.

While there is a lot to consider in this chapter, paying attention to some of the main ideas will not only help you both deal with the stress of writing such a challenging piece of work, but also to lead you away from some common problems and hopefully lead you towards a stronger essay. While it might sound rather sad, the time spent with students as they work on their essays are the most rewarding of my time as a TOK teacher. These are difficult things to write and genuinely stretch all students; invariably they think thoughts, develop arguments, take positions and uncover complexity in their world in a way that, in my view, no other aspect of the IB encourages. Students of all abilities will have their *best* thoughts when working towards this essay. (Unless they do it the night before the deadline. Then it's only a matter of luck. Don't be *that* student.)

### ■ Breakdown of the assessment instrument

The 'assessment instrument' is used by the examiners to judge your essay. It is broken into two main 'aspects':

- 1 Understanding knowledge issues.
- 2 Quality of analysis of knowledge questions.

Below is a summary of the Level 5 descriptor for each of the sections with some advice on how the top level can be achieved.

What can you do to help show that you are meeting each of the elements of the assessment instrument?

### ■ **Aspect one: Understanding knowledge questions**

- Sustained focus on knowledge questions connected to the prescribed title
  - Choose relevant and clear knowledge questions that are directly related to the analysis of the prescribed title.
  - Be able to explain how the analysis of these knowledge questions serves the analysis of the prescribed title.
  - Maintain clear relevance to the prescribed title throughout the essay.
  - Make clear and explicit connections between knowledge questions used to analyse the prescribed title.
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- Investigation of different perspectives and link effectively to areas of knowledge and / or ways of knowing
  - Explore a well-chosen range of approaches to the prescribed title.
  - Create clear and explicit links to AOKs.
  - Use WOKs carefully to explore the complexities of knowledge within the context of an AOK.

### ■ **Aspect two: Quality of analysis of knowledge questions**

- Arguments are clear
  - Develop and maintain a clear narrative or argument throughout the essay – the examiner must know at each stage what is happening in relation to the title.
  - Develop clear justifications for all smaller discussions of premises.
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- Supported by real-life examples
  - Do not use hypothetical examples or speculate about what other people would or might say unless you can explain why you are an authority on the subject.
  - Fully explain the examples, particularly why they make a good example or illustration of the point you want to make.
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- And effectively evaluated
  - Test your own arguments by exploring what others might say (or do say) in disagreement.
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- Counter-claims are extensively explored
  - When exploring what others say in disagreement, make sure you are offering the strongest versions of those counter-claims or counter-arguments and engage with them, explaining why your view is still your view despite there being these other points available.