

## ■ Description, analysis, evaluation

The TOK essay and presentation not only rely on good content (interesting TOK points and examples) but also on good skills in putting forward an argument. The global impression marking descriptors for the top band in both essay and presentation do ask the examiners to think about the quality of the argument. Students, however, too often fall into the trap of not fully understanding the elements that go into developing a convincing argument and the types of thinking that are relevant.

At the most basic level there are three 'levels' of thinking, each of which demonstrates different thinking skills:

- description
- analysis
- evaluation.

These are key in all elements of the IB Diploma, and you often see them in the exam questions. In general, however, TOK examiners (both external and your own teachers) are most interested in seeing good analysis and evaluation. They want to give you the highest marks possible, but without these higher-order skills clearly demonstrated, they simply can't. One of the biggest problems faced by examiners is to wade through the pages and pages and minutes and minutes of *description*, trying to uncover the *analysis* and even the *evaluation*.

But what are the differences between these? What do they mean?

**Description** is an identification and definition of key ideas. To describe is to point out what is there and does not necessarily take any higher-order thinking or understanding. A submission which contains too much description but then doesn't adequately show further thinking skills will not earn top marks since it won't show an individual approach or highlight the thinking of the student.

For example, imagine a classroom full of TOK students being asked to describe what is 'propaganda'. They might say something like 'images or speeches designed to get people to develop certain beliefs' and point me in the direction of certain Second World War posters in the history department corridor. This shows that they know what the word 'propaganda' means and can identify examples of it. This would be an example of shared knowledge; it is the accepted definition, identified as such by a community. The description might even be incredibly detailed and show a very good understanding of what propaganda is.

However, there is nothing of the individual in it and it does not show a full understanding of the concept of 'propaganda'. This will come out in the higher-level thinking skills of analysis and evaluation. Description in both the presentation and essay are an essential part of a well-structured response, but frequently students fill up their time or word count with too much description.

**Analysis**, however, is far more interesting and will allow your teacher's assessment to climb into the higher levels of the criteria. Analysis is about uncovering the relationships beneath the surface of ideas, showing where the complexities of the ideas are and how the ideas relate to other concepts and ideas.

Analysis is a description of how ideas work (rather than just what they are) and being able to explore this shows a better understanding of the material. For example, in an *analysis* of propaganda I would have to make decisions about how to present what I know about propaganda and which elements I'm going to explore and how I am going to link them together. I might choose, for example, to focus on the use of language and link this to how the emotive language of propaganda influences people in sometimes non-conscious ways into constructing certain attitudes or beliefs. Or, I might explore how visual imagery draws on certain cultural motifs in order to influence a viewpoint's intuitive or emotional response. This is where an individual's own perspective and approach start to come into play. While two students could conceivably give me the same definition of propaganda, it is unlikely that they would choose the same sorts of facets to explore in an analysis, and even if they did, they would probably end up developing their responses in quite different ways. This individuality is what the examiners (including your teacher) will want to see.

Finally, the highest level of exploring ideas would be **evaluation**. In an evaluation of the material you would, from your own perspective, offer a comment on the material or offer a judgement on it. It is not evaluation simply to describe a theory or an idea's strengths and weaknesses; this would be description or analysis because the strengths and weaknesses belong to the theory or idea, not the individual exploring them. Evaluation goes beyond this and might discuss whether that idea is a good one or whether it is in some way better than some others, or it might be to take a stand on some debatable issue, or in the context of TOK, take a stand on some knowledge issue. Of course things such as the strengths and weaknesses are crucial for this.

Evaluation might also (especially in a discursive essay) simply be an argument that a particular issue might be seen in a particular light. An evaluative claim can be considered subjective or an example of personal knowledge which needs a clear argument – evaluation is not obviously true, but requires an argument and support for the idea; the essay or presentation serves as that argument.

For example, it is not an evaluative claim that propaganda often makes use of emotive imagery or uses historical beliefs for their effectiveness; that's just what propaganda does (among other things). However, it is an evaluative claim to suggest that the use of one or other of them is what makes it most effective or which makes it *dangerous*.

This evaluative stance is a challenge for many TOK students. Students often get caught in the trap of offering too much description of ideas or examples, and not getting under the ideas and into the analysis of them. Even more difficult is a sustained and explicit commentary on the material. A good analytical essay (generally in the form of a discursive essay) can show all the TOK skills needed to do well, but in the best essays the student is in full command of the material, using the analysis of the material to make his or her own comment on the material. This is the level students really should be aiming for. The examiners are most interested in your commentary on the material; they don't just need the ideas explained to them. They are TOK teachers and already understand it well enough. They want to know your ideas about the material.

### ■ BUILDING KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS

When evaluating anything in the context of TOK, try to remember that the whole point of the course is to get you to be thinking about knowledge. So your comment on propaganda, for example, should focus on how *the things you claim to know* are influenced by the propaganda, not about how you behave or about your *decisions*. Your 'comment on the material' should be about how you think the event, process, or **real-life situation** impacts your *knowledge* about the world.



In what ways and to what effect does propaganda influence our view of historical events?

### ■ Implications and significance

In the level descriptors both 'implications' and 'significance' are mentioned. To achieve Level 5 in either the essay or presentation, you must in some way engage with the 'implications' of your ideas about the material or the knowledge questions involved and their 'significance'. But what do these terms mean?

Two ways to explore the implications and significance of what you are saying in your TOK assessment is to ask the following questions:

Implications

Now what?

Significance

So what, who cares?

Of course, these words and terms do not need to be mentioned explicitly in your work; you don't have to say 'The significance of my idea is ...' (but that would certainly alert an examiner to what you think the significance of your ideas is!). Engaging with these questions will help widen the scope of your analysis and push what you are saying into a wider context. These are things which are often successfully presented at the end of the essay or presentation.

### ■ Implications: 'Now what?'

Implications are mentioned explicitly in the assessment criteria for the essay and would certainly be a key element in a Level 5 essay or presentation. Implication in this sense would be about what the 'next step' of the argument might be or what the extension of the

main ideas of the argument would be. The ideas you have, if extended into new contexts, would have various consequences, and one way of evaluating an idea or a position is to explore these implications.

If, for example, you wish to argue that the seemingly random behaviour of human beings means that no human science can be a 'science', then one implication of this would be that various 'laws' created in psychology, economics or geography are not reliable. But, we see that these fields do, in fact, develop laws which for the most part are useful ways of describing general trends in human behaviours. In other words, they do produce laws which seem to describe how people generally act. Your argument will be stronger if you are able to engage with this implication, perhaps exploring this in terms of the differences between human and natural sciences and showing how this actually helps you understand more deeply the scope or application of the human and natural sciences.

Students often try to argue (unsuccessfully in my view) that, because historians often have a perspective, this means that 'all history is biased'. As 'bias' generally suggests that a claim is unreliable, this claim raises a couple of problematic implications. First, it is hard to see that *all* historical claims are actually 'biased'. It would be hard to see how claims such as 'John F. Kennedy was inaugurated President of the United States 20 January 1961' can be biased. Bias is a claim about the use of evidence, and all the evidence suggests that this was the case. A second implication of the claim that all history is biased is that history can therefore not be considered true. If all history is biased then the very notion of 'truth' seems to be jeopardised, and while this might be a genuinely sophisticated point, students often don't engage with this implication. Another example similar to this is the claim 'all truth is relative'. The implications for this are pretty serious for the student's own essay: see if you can work out why.

## TASK

- 2 Once you have decided on the thesis you wish to develop, consider the following question: *If my thesis is true, how might this affect other claims, either in the same AOK or another AOK?* Reflect on those other claims: are the effects of your thesis acceptable? Do they lead to contradictions elsewhere? Do they help support or help answer other issues relevant to TOK?

Considering the implications is a good way of reflecting on the strength of your own position – if it leads to unacceptable consequences (that all knowledge is false, for example) then maybe you should reconsider. If it helps support or engage with other issues then perhaps it is a good thesis.

One of the traditional elements of a strong concluding paragraph is pointing out what unanswered questions remain. This 'Now what?' question is another way of getting at that and is another form of 'implication'. You might explore what other topics your main point will help answer or what new context you could apply it to. This sort of 'implication' can't be developed until you have already started writing or nearly completed the essay as the 'what next' is 'what next *after* your own analysis'.

### IN PRACTICE

There is another sense of the word 'implication', however, that can be explored before you begin developing your response.

One of the May 2012 prescribed titles is a good example of what this other sense of implication might mean: *Using history and one other area of knowledge, examine the claim that it is possible to attain knowledge despite the problems of bias and selection.*

In 'unpacking' this title, students should be thinking what is implied by the title, meaning what does the title assume? One implication / assumption in the title is that bias and selection are *actually problems when trying to attain knowledge.*

What are 'bias' and 'selection' in the context of history? How do they affect the attainment of knowledge? This would have been a crucial element to explore even before an attempt to engage with the issue of whether or not knowledge is attainable, despite the problems they raise.

The best essays will have pointed this out and explored this problem.

### TASK

- 3 Take the list of prescribed titles that you will have to choose from for your final TOK essay.
  - a Make a list of all the *assumptions* you think are being made by the title (another form of 'implications').
  - b For each one, construct a *knowledge question* that will help engage with that assumption in the title.

For example, above, where we saw that it was assumed that bias and selection are problems, we might ask, 'How do the methods used in the construction of historical knowledge regulate the effect of bias and selection?' or 'Why might the role of intuition and imagination lead to bias or unreliable knowledge in the sciences and history?' or 'What constitute the proper selection of evidence in the construction of knowledge in history or ethics?'

The importance of using knowledge questions such as these in the investigation of the prescribed titles is described in Chapter 1.

In the presentation, this element of applying your conclusions to a separate or different real-life situation is a required element of the top band, and will be explored in more detail below (page 110).

#### ■ Significance: 'So what? Who cares?'

Another key element of the best essays is the way in which they treat the significance of an issue. This is what I call the 'So what? Who cares?' element. Pointing out the significance of an issue means to explain why this is an important question to ask in the first place and why your conclusion is helpful in answering it. The best analyses are of debatable knowledge questions which have genuine consequences for our understanding and approach to knowledge. I am not suggesting that the questions you are exploring will have life and death consequences, but it might be important to understand how knowledge works for various reasons. It might be important in the political realm to understand the effect of certain types of language, for example, or the subtle techniques that academics and scientists might use to make their arguments more convincing than