

If you know these things, then you have already done all the hard work. Congratulations! Get some sleep.

■ Writing to present

After you have decided what you think, you now have to think about how to sculpt it into the form of a 1,600-word essay. You might have already written quite a few words, so much of that work is done. Now you just need to ask yourself questions about what makes a good essay and take your material and apply those ideas.

I do not intend to offer specific advice on how to write the perfect essay. Your TOK teacher and other teachers you are working with will have the time and expertise which will help here. Crafting an essay is another process altogether and will require moulding and rewriting throughout. Your teachers will be able to put a process into place to help and give you advice. The comments which follow, therefore, are less a 'how-to' but more a 'pay attention to'.

■ Argument plan

A good argument will start with how it means to end. This means that you must know your 'thesis' or conclusion. Can you state it in a brief sentence or two? Does the thesis offer a direct response to the prescribed title?

A good argument will also have a number of 'premises' which, when taken together, give weight to the thesis. You also need to be able to briefly state your premises in a few short sentences.

Each premise will itself need justification. Concrete examples are crucial for this element – they will help illustrate and justify the premises.

A good argument will also be aware of what someone who disagrees with the thesis or the premises would say. Can you articulate the position of someone who disagrees? What would they say in response to you? What examples would they use as evidence against you? Try to make these counter-arguments as strong as possible or else you might be committing 'the straw man fallacy'.

A good argument will also reply to the counter-arguments. It shows good thinking skills to be aware of how people might disagree with you, but even better thinking to then reply to those counter-claims and show why, despite these worries, your position is still better.

In summary, any good argument will make clear the thesis being supported, make explicit the premises and evidence for that thesis, show what counter or alternative positions are available, and why you still hold to your own thesis. If you can do this you have developed a very strong argument.

■ Dictionary definitions

Many of the TOK essays I read while examining make a point of taking the time (and spending the words) to offer an explicit definition of key words in the title. Often this is prefaced 'The Oxford English Dictionary defines X as ...' To me, this is a clear case of mixing up 'writing to think' with 'writing to present'. The student

has been told that 'you should define key words', and while this is probably true, it is not true that the definition actually has to be in the essay! You might not need to include it. The only reason to include a definition in a TOK essay is: if the word is so uncommon that it is unlikely the examiner will know it; if a proper technical definition is required; or if the commonplace definition from the dictionary will actually be tested or challenged.

TOK is a course that should create a sceptical approach to dictionaries and their definitions in the first place – as you will have learned from TOK, the meaning of the words we use are malleable and historically contextualised: the definition of a word will change over time. While dictionaries are useful to identify how words are used at the moment, they are not the sorts of things which necessarily dictate the meaning of those words. We decide how words are used when we use them, and dictionaries just capture this common usage of the moment. The word 'gay' is a classic example: once meaning happy or joyful, it has come to be used as synonymous with homosexuality.

Therefore, offering dictionary definitions and then doing nothing with them suggests that you are accepting dictionaries as genuine authorities of the meanings of words, and this might make a TOK examiner sceptical: have you really understood the nature of language in the construction of knowledge if you think that dictionaries are 'true'?

So, by all means, keep the dictionary close to hand when working on your TOK assessment; they might be very helpful as you think through the various approaches you can take, but it's likely the examiner doesn't need you to write out a definition for them. You might include the dictionary definition if you are making a point about the limits of dictionaries as authorities when it comes to how words are used, but all too often students randomly define 'key words' in the title then completely ignore those definitions or never use them again.

There are two main types of TOK essay:

- **Discursive:** the essay that seeks to discuss.
- **Persuasive:** the essay that seeks to persuade.

Both can be successful responses to the TOK prescribed titles. In many cases, the prescribed title in fact seems to lean towards the discursive approach, but even in those cases students can choose to write in either style.

■ Discursive essays

Essays which try to 'discuss' are said to be discursive. This means that their primary objective is to outline and explain any number of primary issues having to do with a topic. Success in these discursive essays requires that the students identify key issues, then explain them and analyse them fully. At the end of reading a discursive essay, your reader should have a good sense of the importance and significance of the key elements in the area you are focusing on.

Don't, however, underestimate the critical nature of 'discuss' in the various prescribed titles. It is not the 'discuss' of 'Let's meet up for coffee and discuss that movie' – this sense of 'discuss' means merely the idea of talking around an issue and there is very little at stake, or not much by way of significance, in a discussion of this type.

You should be reading the prompt 'discuss' in prescribed titles as more like when your parents say they 'need to discuss your behaviour last weekend' or your Principal calls you into his or her office saying, 'We need to discuss your recent academic performance.' Here 'discuss' signifies that something is *at stake* and that it needs to be *sorted out*.

Your job in a discursive essay is to identify that issue and explore it with an eye to illuminating or clarifying the significant issues and seeking a position on those issues. After reading a good discursive essay, your examiner should understand clearly not just what the issues might be, but also what you think the important issues are, what questions and problems exist, why those issues are significant and possibly how those issues can be resolved.

TASK

- 6 Choose past prescribed titles that ask you to 'discuss'. First make a list of ideas or content that you think you need to discuss (in the way you might 'discuss' a movie). Next make a list of *issues that need sorting out* relating to that content. If you write an essay on the title, it should be on these *issues*.

Things to consider in a discursive essay:

■ Identify key issues

The key to success in this first element is to make good choices. The choice of ideas you wish to 'discuss' is an important decision and one which will tell the examiner the level of sophistication with which you are approaching the title.

For example, a recent title asked students to explore the extent to which the knower's perspective was 'essential' in the pursuit of knowledge. One of the major pitfalls of this title was that students elected to focus on the notion of *how* the knower's perspective *impacted* on the pursuit of knowledge. So an essay which discussed the impact of the knower's perspective certainly would not have been wrong, but it would not have discussed the more sophisticated issues having to do with the notion that the knower's perspective was *essential*.

■ Explain and analyse these issues

The success of a discursive essay then builds on a good choice of what issue gets discussed. The major pitfall in this area is that the explanation and analysis of the material ends up being disjointed, meaning that the various issues identified, explained and analysed appear as if they have little relation to each other. In other words, the essay appears to be more of a 'stream of consciousness' than a genuine discussion.

When students write 'Another issue is ...' or 'This links up to what I have said before in that ...' examiners wonder just what that link is meant to be, or just how the student thinks the next issue is related to those that came before it. 'Moreover' and 'Furthermore' are often also simply signposting (possibly) that another vaguely related idea is coming.

TOK TRAP

Poor signposting

Essays need signposts: connective phrases which tell the reader how each paragraph relates to the main context of the essay and the specific ideas that surround it.

Look at the following 'signposts' and rate them according to how much they actually tell the reader about how the ideas relate to one another:

- 'Another point is ...'
- 'In contrast to this point ...'
- 'Moreover ...'
- 'A counter-claim would be ...'
- 'This leads on to ...'
- 'But things are more complicated than this ...'
- 'Applying this idea to the following situation, however ...'
- 'One implication of this idea is ...'
- 'However, it is not clear that this is entirely true ...'
- 'While there may be strengths to this position, further analysis indicates that ...'

■ Develop a common theme

The point then is that even in a discursive essay, there must be a common thread to the essay which creates clear links between ideas. You might use a particular WOK or AOK to create the context in which you will be discussing your ideas.

I use a variety of metaphors to illustrate this point. I ask students, 'What is the main issue on which you will hang your various ideas like coat hangers hanging on a clothes rail?' or, 'What is the trunk from which your ideas will grow like branches from a tree?' or, 'What is the main idea that your ideas will contribute to, like streams feeding into a larger river?'

This thread, that your ideas are feeding into or hanging from, is the main issue I mentioned above when defining the various types of 'discuss'. It is the behaviour at the weekend or the academic record that will serve to guide and focus the rest of the discussion.

Make sure your examiner knows what that main point is. Having this main context tells them that you have chosen consciously the ideas you are discussing – you are not simply writing ideas down as they pop into your mind: you know how they relate to one another and how, together, they create a single sophisticated discussion of the topic at hand. In the assessment criteria it makes reference to 'knowledge questions connected to the prescribed title'; the main point of discussion of your essay can be identified very effectively through identifying one or two knowledge questions which capture this main point.

The explanation and analysis of your essay will then build on common ideas being discussed throughout, thereby giving the essay a coherent and unified vision. Explanation and analysis go far beyond description, and knowing why you are introducing an idea into the discussion helps you extend beyond simple description. Similarly, you might have all sorts of really good ideas, but without a clear structure, they will just rattle around like ping pong balls dropped on the floor. Examiners call these 'stream of consciousness' essays and can spot them a mile away.

TASK

- 7 Choose either the prescribed titles you will be using or past titles and 'discuss' them with your group as part of the brainstorming step. See if you can identify the main idea or ideas that the prescribed title is trying to get at. There might be more than one. If you were to write a full essay you might use that main idea / problem / issue to create the context in which the rest of your ideas would fit and be related to one another.

■ Persuasive essays

A persuasive essay is an essay which seeks to convince its reader of something. It will make a point and try to offer reasons to believe it: it puts forward an *argument*. And by argument I don't mean 'two conflicting viewpoints'. In the words of Monty Python's famous 'Argument Clinic' sketch, an argument is 'an intellectual process' or 'a collective series of statements designed to establish a definite proposition' (John Cleese and Graham Chapman, 1972). It is not simply a series of contradicting statements.

An argument seeks to establish the truth of some position or some claim, which is generally called the thesis, or the conclusion. I prefer 'thesis' over 'conclusion' as students often confuse the 'conclusion' (that which an argument is seeking to establish) with 'the concluding paragraph' (the final paragraph of the essay). In terms of the TOK essay, if you are writing a persuasive essay, you want to seek to establish a thesis which is a direct response to the prescribed title. You should be able to say the prescribed title out loud, then say your thesis and the two together should make perfect sense (though, of course, your thesis will need support!)

TASK

- 8 For a good example of what an argument is not, search for the Monty Python 'Argument Clinic' sketch online. Try to identify exactly what the customer says an argument *is* and what he says it *is not*.

TASK

- 9 These thesis statements could be thought of as direct responses to the various prescribed titles. Can you match the title to the thesis?

Prescribed title

- a *There is no such thing as a neutral question. Evaluate this statement with reference to two areas of knowledge.* (May 2015)
- b *'Knowledge is nothing more than the systematic organisation of facts.' Discuss this statement in relation to two areas of knowledge.* (May 2014)
- c *In what ways may disagreement aid the pursuit of knowledge in the natural and human sciences?* (May 2013)
- d *'Knowledge gives us a sense of who we are.' To what extent is this true in the human sciences and one other Area of Knowledge?* (Nov 2013)
- e *'Without the group to verify it, knowledge is not possible.'* Discuss. (Nov 2015)
- f *'Some areas of knowledge seek to describe the world, whereas others seek to transform it.'* (Nov 2014)

Thesis statement

- i The nature of the evidence and the role of testability of claims means that contrasting views have different effects on the overall reliability of the knowledge produced in the AOKs.
- ii While both the sciences and arts might tell us about our own nature, they use significantly different concepts and methods to do so. Ultimately, the knowledge gained in the arts is far more significant.
- iii While questions in mathematics often rely on certain axiomatic assumptions, they don't necessarily make that knowledge less reliable. How questions are posed in the human sciences, however, does directly relate to the validity of the knowledge gained from the answers.
- iv No knowledge is genuinely useful unless it is aimed at solving real-world problems.
- v In all forms of knowledge, shared knowledge plays an important role, particularly in the form of the methods and the concepts used. However, that role is significantly different in measuring the reliability and importance of that knowledge for the individual.
- vi The concept of 'fact' varies among AOKs, which suggests that the methods and scope of the AOK imposes a structure on the raw material of knowledge which may or may not be how the way the world really is.

How do you build support for your thesis? In an argument, there needs to be a number of claims which, if true, will make your thesis more convincing. These are called 'premises'. The premises should be related to one another and build on one another in a way that leads naturally to the conclusion.

Each premise will need its own support, and this is where you get into the detailed explanation of real-life examples and their analysis, showing both that you understand the nature of the TOK course and that you can create a 'cogent analysis' of the various knowledge questions involved. Your essay might have all the structure and clearly identified theses in the world, but if you don't offer strong evidence for the premises, the arguments amount to nothing. Many students offer clear, convincing but far too abstract points without showing how these ideas work in reality or testing them through appeal to illustrative examples. This suggests that the students are struggling to find real-world application of the concepts of the title, something the examiners want to see.

There is no requirement that you must convince your reader that what you say is true, but you should try to develop a compelling argument, one which is well justified and has clear evidence to support it.

The thing to remember, however, is that *you might not know your thesis when you begin the process*. Which is why, if you are hoping to create a well-polished essay, you should not assume that your first attempt at writing will be the final product. If you have broken your process into the two stages I am suggesting, then this won't be a problem. Whatever work it takes to identify the thesis and how to support it is the first stage, the second stage then is how to present it.

The best essays are generally those which have a clear purpose to them. These can be either discursive or persuasive. However, in my experience, if a student is opting for the discursive essay, he or she will too often fall into the trap of not weaving a coherent narrative out of the various discussion points: the essay ends up simply being a list of barely connected ideas. For this reason, I encourage my students to aim for persuasive essays because doing so means they will (hopefully) keep that main thesis in mind as they write, and each section of the essay will be directly linked.

Even if the essay is a discussion, students can take the main comparative point that I suggested earlier as being essential to a discursive essay and turn *that* into the thesis of a persuasive essay. Alternatively, the main thesis might be descriptive, simply identifying the main comparative claim that is going to serve as the organising feature of the essay: 'The essay title raises challenging questions having to do with reliability in the science, and I will be exploring the variety of issues pertaining this' would serve as a thesis of sorts for a discursive essay.

■ What makes a good essay?

■ What to put in the introductory paragraph

Students are often trained to include certain elements in an introductory paragraph: the thesis; some key definitions; a general idea of how the essay will unfold. This is good advice.

Remember, as a rule of thumb, the introduction should serve the same function as a movie trailer: it gives you a hint of the main characters, some indication of the central dilemma and maybe an explosion or two to catch your interest. In your introduction