

they should be. Whatever the knowledge questions you are exploring, try to keep in mind why it's important to explore them and use that in your analysis.

The presentation assessment criteria requires you to explore the significance of your ideas: you must explain the significance of your ideas about knowledge for the real-life situation.

The TOK essay

The points above are meant to be general advice for the construction of your ideas, regardless of whether those ideas are presented in the TOK essay or the TOK presentation. This general advice might be applied to the essay and presentation equally, but there are some differences that should not be ignored.

This section is about how to apply this advice to the specifics of the TOK essay.

■ Essay assessment criteria

TASK

- 4 Print off a copy of the essay assessment criteria and try to define or explain the key words (many of which will already be in **bold** type). As you read through this section, see if your definitions are similar to what is written here.

IN PRACTICE

The first task of the TOK essay assessment criteria is to establish the extent to which you have met the primary objective of the essay: *Does the student present an appropriate and cogent analysis of knowledge questions in discussing the title?* (page 60 of the Subject Guide)

In order to understand and use this to help guide your writing, it will be helpful to unpack the key terms in this objective.

The term 'knowledge questions' here *does not imply that you have to list a number of actual knowledge questions*. The idea is that, in discussing the title, you will have to use issues having to do with second-order questions about knowledge as steps in your analysis of the title. You do not have to explicitly list knowledge questions and then try to answer them. Always keep your focus on the main title and use subsidiary knowledge questions as steps towards a full comment on the title.

The term 'appropriate' refers to the relevance of the essay – are you clearly focused on the issues about knowledge which are raised by the prescribed title? In other words, do you understand what TOK is about and can you identify the right sorts of issues to discuss in relation to the title? When you have completed a draft of your essay, go through it line by line and see if you are able to describe why you have made each point. If you can't, it might not be relevant.

The phrase 'cogent analysis' is a bit more complicated but refers to whether or not a student can create a discussion or an argument of those knowledge questions which is a sophisticated and logical 'comment' on the prescribed title. Examiners don't want to just know that you can identify knowledge questions relevant to the title (description), they want to know what you think about them (analysis and evaluation).

The assessment criteria themselves contain two 'bands' which are largely focused on the two aspects mentioned above: 'Understanding knowledge questions' and 'Quality of analysis of knowledge questions'. Even though there are two elements to consider, the examiner's final mark is still 'holistic' in the sense that the examiner will place the essay in one of the five levels based on a global impression after they have read it. The question for you then, is how best to convince the examiner that your essay belongs in Level 5!

■ Deciding what to think

TOK essays are difficult to write. Every year I have students tell me that the TOK is by far the most challenging essay they have had to write, in some ways even more challenging than the Extended Essay. However, I find that the reason many students find the TOK essay so challenging is because they have not considered it as a two-step process: they have soldiered ahead, churning out ideas and words in an attempt to reach the far-off and magical goal of 1,600 words. They often find while they write, however, that the issue is far more challenging than they thought it was. They are then faced with a choice:

Do I go back and change my ideas based on my new thinking or do I carry on towards the finish and make the most of what I have written so far?

Going back is always the best idea because your essay will be far more coherent and directed if you know what you think before you begin presenting your ideas. If you just carry on, the end of the essay will likely not match up with the beginning.

A more structured approach which divides the thinking from the presenting is meant to alleviate much of the suffering that comes with this sudden realisation that after a thousand words the wheels have come off the cart. I don't suggest that this will necessarily make the process easier (although I think it does), but it will probably make it more of an enjoyable journey.

IN PRACTICE

For me the idea is simple: first work out what it is that you want to say, then work out how best to say it. In the case of TOK, you must first put in the hard work of crafting your ideas and determining what it is that you think about the knowledge questions in your presentation or the issues pertaining to the prescribed title. Work out your answer and the various elements of that answer, then make decisions about what is the best way to present it.

These two phases are equally important but they are quite different in the types of questions you are answering in them (see earlier 'Target questions' page 67).

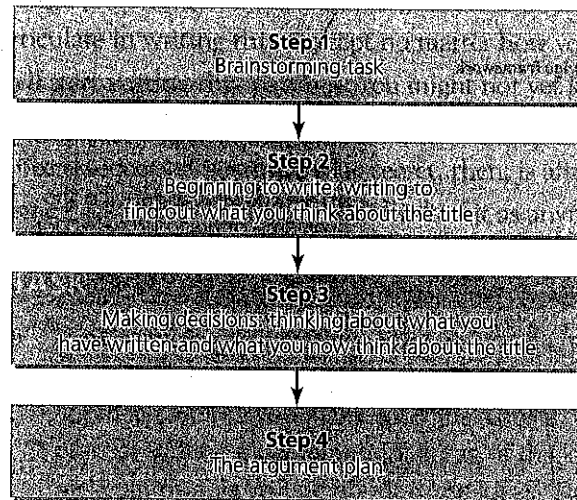
That first phase (**Deciding what to think**) will require you to try to articulate ideas, then test them, cross them out, modify them and sometimes start again, until you develop a series of ideas which together answer the prescribed title or the knowledge question you set yourself in the presentation. During this 'thinking phase', you can write, use sticky notes, mind-maps, spider diagrams or anything that helps you to develop your response.

So how best do you proceed in a way that ends in an essay you can be proud of? The steps which follow can be used as a guide. However, keep in mind that the steps will likely overlap in places. You might be making choices about the sequencing of ideas while you are simply articulating the key ideas of the essay – this is fine, it's all part of the process. The other key point to remember is that this is time-consuming and so represents the ideal situation. In reality you will be subject to deadlines for your writing as well as a whole wealth of other pressures on your time.

In addition to this, you will probably have other homework, other IAs, sports training and fixtures, plays to learn lines for, rehearsals for music events, concerts to go to, movies to see and friends to hang out with. Some of you might take time to sleep as well.

The best advice is to start early, do your best and don't wait until the last minute (but really, you know this already). The prescribed titles come out in September for May examination students and March for November students: you don't have to wait for your teachers to put a process into place to begin preparation.

I suggest that deciding what you think can be broken down into roughly four steps:



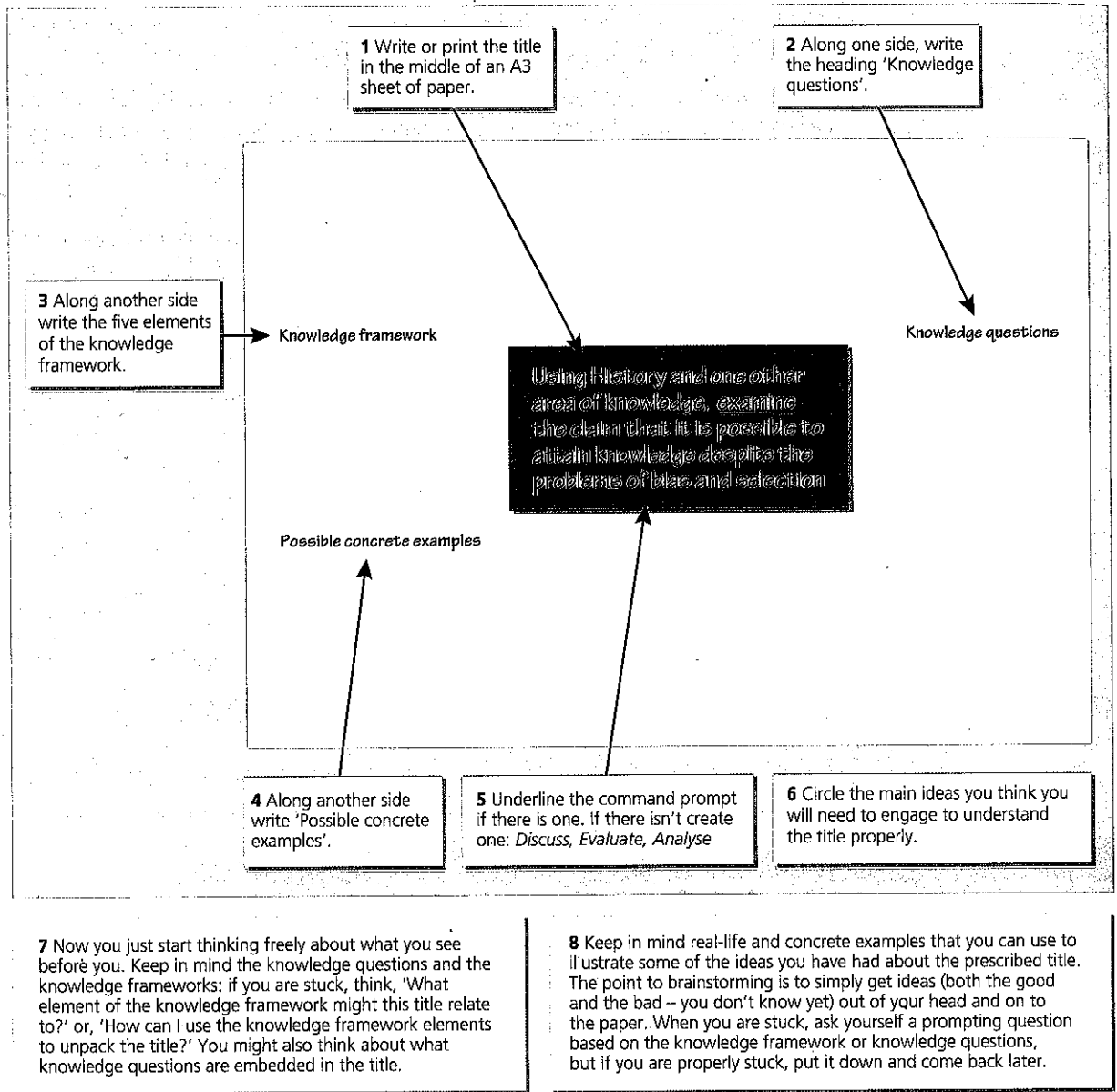
Steps to developing a response to the prescribed title

■ Step 1: Brainstorming task

In the first part of this stage, you don't want to throw out any ideas, just get them out of your head. 'The more and the messier is the merrier' is my mantra. Ideally you want more ideas, so you can start making decisions about what to include. Brainstorming and mind-mapping are ideal for this sort of free thinking.

I try to think about the prescribed title as a mystery box and the 'unpacking' of it as literally breaking open parts of it and seeing what is there (concepts, AOKs, command prompts, key words, and so on). In some cases, if the prescribed title addresses a certain concept 'bias' or a WOK, then this gives you the opportunity to apply a whole range of ideas, if relevant. Simply writing a short paragraph about these ideas might be a way to start writing if you are stuck.

Generally, however, before you start any writing, I would suggest the following:



There is no reason why, at this stage (and really, at this stage only) you cannot explore ideas in collaboration with a friend – you are only throwing ideas around without any judgement of them. When you start to notice that certain of the ideas you have identified mean that other ideas are not going to be relevant, this means that you have begun to establish a direction, you are now making choices and building your own individual response to the title. This is when you should **stop collaborating** as you will run the risk of either giving others your ideas or too heavily drawing on the ideas of others and falling foul of the academic honesty requirements.

You have finished brainstorming when you start to formulate hypotheses about how you will actually construct a response. At this point you might use different coloured pens and highlighters to identify which ideas you like, which examples you think might be fruitful or which elements of the knowledge framework you would like to focus on. When considering the knowledge questions you have identified, you must be able to explain clearly and explicitly why that knowledge question is going to help you answer the title. Do not engage with knowledge questions unless they are clear 'stepping-stones'

■ Step 2: Beginning to write: writing to find out what you think

Often you can begin the next stage by writing words on paper or on screen, not by 'writing the introduction'. In some titles you will have to address certain issues, so start by writing them out.

For example, the May 2016 prescribed title '*Knowledge within a discipline develops according to the principles of natural selection.*' *How useful is this metaphor?* requires you to discuss and explain the biological notion of natural selection. You might start by writing out a paragraph about your understanding of natural selection. At some point you will have to articulate in writing this concept no matter how you approach the title, so you might as well start writing that part out. You might not yet know how best to present it or where in the essay it will go (that's a 'deciding how to present' question), but you will have to engage with it, so just start writing. The secret, then, is after you have done it, you put it away and come back to it later, and do not think of it as anything like a final product.

TASK

- 5 Look at the prescribed titles from which you must choose. For each, make a list of the ideas that you think you will have to engage with, no matter what your approach. Before you make your final choice, you might compare your lists and even practise writing a paragraph for some of the key ideas you have identified. Do you feel comfortable writing about those ideas? Do you have things to say about those concepts? If not, then that title might not be for you.

This phase of writing has unique questions which are different from the questions you encounter in the 'presenting phase' (and by 'present' here I mean, offer your ideas to your audience, which might be in the form of a traditional essay or in a stand-up presentation). In this second phase you will make decisions about the order of the ideas, which ideas will go in which paragraph or on which slide.

The following sections offer some advice about how to use these two processes in relation to both the essay and the presentation.

- **Tip 1.** Some word-processing software has what is called 'Outline view' which makes developing and sequencing ideas very easy. I use it when I have to produce large and complex pieces of writing, like a textbook. (I am using it right now!)

I use the headings to organise ideas, and use the subheadings and 'Body text' to begin the process of articulating the ideas. When I am done with one section (or have run out of things to say), I just close it so I cannot see it any more and move on to work on some other section. By collapsing various levels, you can see at a glance how the main elements of your writing are shaping up.

As I write in this view I begin to uncover ideas I didn't know I had and I can easily move them about. When the time comes for the second half of the process, writing to present the ideas, I can easily switch the view to 'Print layout' and voila, much of my essay is written already!

- **Tip 2.** As you identify particular ideas and concepts you will begin finding relationships between them. Here again you should try to write out how you see those relationships working. As you do this you will now start thinking about (or looking for)

genuine examples that will be helpful in illustrating your ideas. Here too, rather than worrying about when to present the examples, just practise writing them out – take up as many words as you need to make it a good example.

The best ideas you will have during this stage are the ideas about what sorts of **knowledge questions** you come across while thinking about the title. Remember not to let your knowledge questions draw you away from staying focused on the prescribed title. One section in your drafting of ideas at this point should be an articulation of why the knowledge question you have uncovered is relevant to the title: just a sentence or two will suffice.

As you continue this, you will find that you are building a general approach to the title, or ideas about what you *think* about the issues contained in the title. If you are lucky you will have a number of different approaches or ideas to choose from. Work through some of the details for each of the approaches to see which are more fruitful, or which you have the most ideas for. Your challenge in the latter stages of this *thinking* phase is to make decisions about which ideas you prefer to explore.

■ **Step 3: Making decisions: thinking about what you have written and what you now think about the title**

Now that you have written a few words, you can start reflecting on just what you have decided about what you think. You can think strategically about this by asking the following questions (but not necessarily in this order):

- Which of your ideas *do you actually think are correct*? It's far easier to justify a position which you believe to be the correct position.
- Which ideas do you think are *best justified*? You might find that you are not sure what you think, but that you have a couple of good arguments for one idea or another.
- Which ideas do you think you have *enough* words to fill an essay with? You don't want to choose a topic then spend a lot of time on it only to find that you really don't have a lot to say about it.
- Which ideas do you think are most *surprising* or interesting? Often you can capture the imagination (and approval) of the examiners if you can develop an idea that challenges the status quo or explores something in a unique and surprising way.
- Which of your ideas are a genuine response to the prescribed title as set (not some subsidiary knowledge question you have associated to the prescribed title)? You *must* make sure that *all* of your ideas are relevant to the prescribed title. I always have a copy of the main essay title to hand when working on essays – keep going back to the title and ask, 'Is what I'm writing directly relevant to a response to that title?'

TOK TRAP

While you are producing ideas in this way, and at this stage, you must not think of the words you are writing as the final words, in their final form. Once you have decided on your approach, you might wish to use much of what you have written but you will

still have to work through the ideas and develop your writing.

You will have to add *signposts* linking the sections together and introductory and concluding passages to help elucidate the points you are trying to make.

■ Step 4: The argument plan

The final outcome of this process should be a clear understanding of what your response to the prescribed title is going to be. After you have made your decisions about which of your ideas you are going to develop and which you think best answer the title, you should try to organise them into an *argument*.

One way of capturing this argument is with an 'argument plan'. This is **not** an essay plan. The essay plan is an outline of the order or 'sequencing' of your ideas – in other words, the culmination of the second stage of the process.

The argument plan is an overview of what your ideas actually are and how they relate to one another. This includes: your overall thesis, or a general statement which is the most direct response to the prescribed title; the various premises or claims that you will use to support the final claim; and what sorts of examples you will use to illustrate those points.

As the final essay should consider counter-claims and counter-arguments, you should identify these elements in your argument plan and have an idea of what you are going to say in *reply* to them – since you don't want to leave objections to your argument unanswered!

The first stage of the process is complete when you can answer the following:

- 1 What is my answer to the title? What is my *thesis* (a sentence or two which clearly identifies what I want to tell the reader)? If you are writing a *discursive* essay you should still be able to consolidate your ideas into an easily managed general claim you want the reader to come away with.

- 2 What do I have to establish in order for my thesis to be well justified?

- 3 What would someone who disagrees with me say and how would I respond to them?

- 4 What concrete, real-life examples am I prepared to offer as illustrations of my points?

- 5 What are the implications of what I am saying?

- 6 Why should anyone who thinks about the nature of knowledge care about what I'm saying?

- 7 What knowledge questions do I engage with as part of my response to the title?

