

## How to Structure your TOK Essay

When writing your essay you should bear in mind that the main problem with most of the TOK essays is that they are not clearly structured and that they do not explore ideas in depth which makes the ideas in them difficult to follow resulting in an argument that is, at best, not convincing and, at worst, just plain confusing.

Structure and detail are really easy thing to get right if you put time and effort into planning your essay before you start to write. There are many ways to structure a TOK essay but the structure outlined here is simple, straight forward and works well for the majority of essay questions and students. It is also the same structure that is outlined in the planning document that can be found on this web page.

They key thing is to know what your answer is before you start to write. You might not know what your answer is when you begin your plan but, by the end of it, the process of planning should have helped you come up with a clear idea of what your answer is, the arguments for it, the evidence you are going to use to support your argument and some of the arguments against you that you are going to have to defeat.

Before you start you should consider what your gut reaction to the answer is and then brainstorm the reasons for and against this answer, if you realise that there are more good reasons against your gut reaction than for it then you can always change your mind. It's better to do this in your plan than half way through your essay! This brainstorm is important because it is going to provide you with the **Main Points** that are going to form the basis of your essay.

Each essay should have three clear stages:

### Introduction:

- identify the knowledge issue that the question is 'getting at' and make it clear that this is what the essay is about;
- briefly outline your answer to the question including the 4-6 **Main Points** that argue for your answer;
- you might possibly offer definitions of key terms, although it is often a good idea to save this until you use these words in the essay and you can then offer definitions when they become relevant to the reader rather than hitting them with all of the definitions in a big, boring, confusing mass right at the start. When you do offer a definition make it a personal one, not a dictionary one

### Main Body:

- this will consist of a series of 4-6 **Main Points** that 'prove' that your answer to the question is the correct one;
- each **Main Point** should be in a separate paragraph;
- each paragraph should begin and / or end with a sentence that clearly links back to the question, probably by actually using the key words from the question;
- the best **Main Points** will have the following sections:
  - you should start by clearly explaining one reason **for** your position,
  - you should then support this with at least one piece of **convincing evidence**,
  - you should then consider an **argument against** this point (a counter claim),
  - this counter claim should also be supported by **evidence**,
  - you should then **evaluate** how serious / effective this counterclaims is and try to **respond** to it by either pointing out that it is not a valid objection and explaining why or (and this is more complex!) admitting that the counterclaim has a point and then modifying your initial point to find a compromise between the two;
- make sure that you have got good, interesting, unusual, innovative evidence to support your points. Try not to use really well known examples and definitely avoid using things that everyone knows as 'common sense' because, many times, common sense actually turns out to be wrong;

- some of the best counterclaims will come from different perspectives and attempt to challenge your answer by viewing the issue from a different perspective, a perspective where some of the assumptions that you have relied are not valid. Some of the best responses to counterclaims will point out that these perspectives are biased, limited, uncertain or subjective;
- this structure should be repeated 4-6 times until you have worked through all of your **Main Points**, however be careful not to make the structure too repetitive and, as such, you don't have to consider counterclaims for every point.

### **Conclusion:**

- end by summing up your points and offering a clear overall answer to the question. This may seem boring, but it will mean that your essay is well structured because it builds up clearly to this final point: there should be no surprise endings in a TOK essay! If you are very confident in your writing ability you may choose to end on your final, and often strongest, **Main Point**. However, if you do this you need to ensure that it definitely has the tone of a conclusion and that the point you make somehow encapsulates the other major points in your essay;
- end by identifying any assumptions underpinning your argument;
- and the possible implications of your argument.