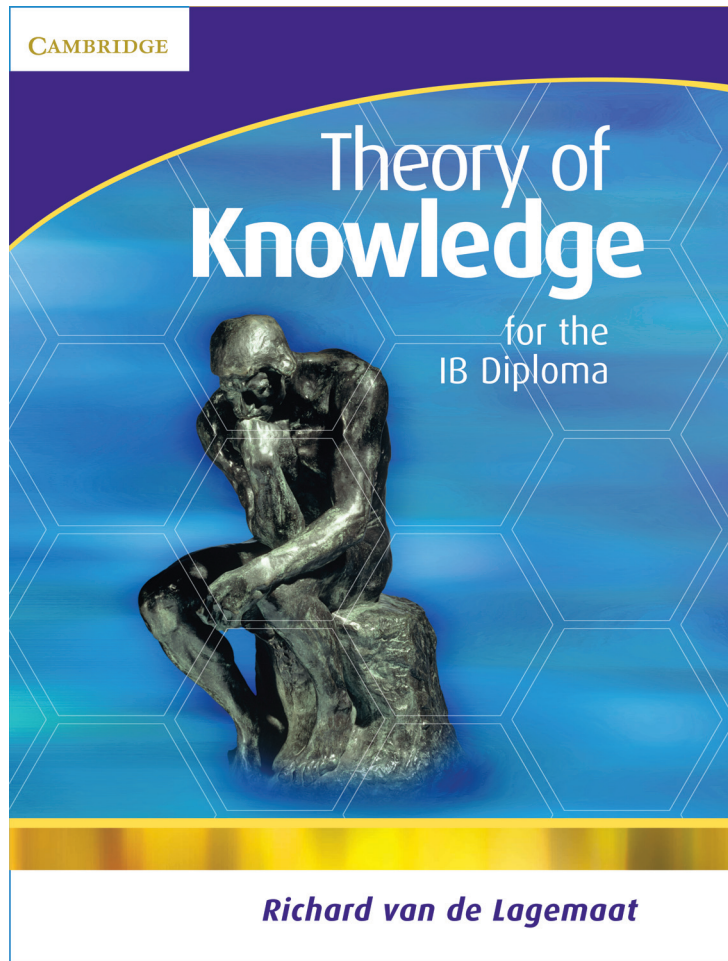


Writing a TOK essay

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Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma

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Writing a TOK essay

‘Most people would rather die than think; in fact they do so.’

BERTRAND RUSSELL, 1872–1970

‘You aren’t going to have good ideas, unless you have lots of ideas and some principle of selection.’

LINUS PAULING, 1901–1994

‘It is dangerous to read about a subject before we have thought about it ourselves . . . When we read, another person thinks for us; we merely repeat his mental process.’

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER, 1788–1860

‘I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say.’

WILLIAM FAULKNER, 1897–1962

‘What is written without pain is read without pleasure.’

SAMUEL JOHNSON, 1709–1784

‘Just as the sentence contains one idea in all its fullness, so the paragraph should embrace a distinct episode; and as sentences should follow one another in harmonious sequence, so paragraphs must fit into one another like the automatic couplings of railway carriages.’

SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL, 1874–1965

‘Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.’

MATTHEW ARNOLD, 1822–1888

‘Deep people strive for clarity; those who wish to appear deep strive for obscurity.’

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, 1844–1900

‘Thoughts obey the law of gravity to this extent, that they travel much more easily from head down to paper than they do from paper up to head, so that for the latter journey they require all the assistance we can give them.’

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER, 1788–1860

‘Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.’

ALBERT EINSTEIN, 1879–1955

‘Let no one say that I have said nothing new; the arrangement of the subject is new. When we play tennis, we both play with the same ball, but one of us places it better.’

BLAISE PASCAL, 1623–1662

Introduction

The word 'essay' comes from the French verb *essayer* meaning 'to try' or 'to attempt'. (A French philosopher called Michel de Montaigne, who lived from 1533 to 1592, was the first person to use the word in its modern sense.) The origin of the word is of more than passing interest. Theory of Knowledge (TOK) is concerned with questions that do not have definite answers. This does not make such questions redundant. On the contrary, many of the most important questions in life do not have definite answers. When writing a TOK essay, it is best to think not so much in terms of answering a question as of **illuminating a problem**. That is what you are *trying* to do. A certain amount of humility is in order here. You are unlikely to come up with the definitive solution to the problem!

To illuminate a problem is to do such things as: explain what the problem is and why it matters; clarify the meaning of key words; consider different ways of thinking about the problem; construct arguments and counter-arguments; give examples; assess supporting evidence; explore implications; make relevant connections; and uncover hidden assumptions.

Since it deals with open-ended questions, an essay is essentially *personal* in nature. Other people may have come this way before, and you can doubtless learn a great deal from their explorations. But your essay should be more than a summary of other people's opinions or a loose paraphrase of some textbook or other. You need to have the courage – at least occasionally – to strike out on your own; for this is *your* attempt to illuminate the problem.

The IB requirement

Prescribed titles

You have to choose one essay from a list of ten 'prescribed titles' which are set by the IBO (International Baccalaureate Organization). These essays are usually **comparative** in nature: you are expected to compare and contrast different ways of knowing (perception, language, reason, emotion) and/or different areas of knowledge (mathematics, natural sciences, human sciences, history, ethics, the arts). Here are two prescribed titles from 2007:

- 1 Compare the roles played by reason and imagination in at least two Areas of Knowledge.
- 2 When mathematicians, historians and scientists say that they have explained something, are they using the word 'explain' in the same way?

Assessment criteria

Your essay will be graded in accordance with four criteria laid down by the IBO, each of which carries equal weight. Make sure that you have your own copy of these criteria and keep them clearly in mind when writing your essay. You might find it helpful to reduce them to a list of key points on a single sheet of paper along the following lines:

A Understanding knowledge issues B Knower's perspective

- Focused on knowledge issues
- Links and comparisons
- Relevant
- Sophisticated understanding
- Independent thinking
- Self-awareness
- Different perspectives
- Varied examples

C Analysis of knowledge issues D Organisation of ideas

- Insight and depth
- Main points justified
- Arguments and counter-arguments
- Assumptions and implications
- Well-structured
- Key concepts explained
- Factual accuracy
- References

As a rough approximation – and aide memoire – you might think of the above criteria in terms of four Cs:

CONTENT (criterion A): *Think: knowledge issues*

CREATIVITY (criterion B): *Think: personal thought*

CRITICAL THINKING (criterion C): *Think: arguments and counter-arguments*

CLARITY (criterion D): *Think: well-structured essay*

Although there is more to it than this, if your essay is focused on knowledge issues, shows personal thought, develops arguments and counter-arguments, and is clearly written and well-structured, then you will at least be on the right track.

Getting started

TOK notes

Throughout the TOK course, try to keep a good set of class notes. These will prove an invaluable resource when it comes to writing your essay. You should be clear about what it means to take notes. Simply going through handouts with a highlighter pen or cutting and pasting things from the Internet is not enough. *You need to express things in your own words.* This will help you to digest the ideas you come across and is a good test of whether you really understand them. Here are two other pieces of advice:

- 1 As well as contributing to class discussions, try to keep track of them in your notes. The range of ideas and points of view that naturally come up in such discussions will help you to see how many different positions and perspectives can be taken on a topic.
- 2 Try to supplement your class notes with examples taken from your own experience, the subjects that you study and the media. You will be able to use some of these examples when it comes to writing your essay.

Choice of question

You will need to think carefully about which title to choose from the IBO prescribed list. To avoid falling at the first hurdle, make sure that:

- **You understand the question** You should be clear about what the question means, what knowledge issues it raises and what is and is not relevant to it.
- **You are interested in the question** If you are not interested in the question, then you will find it difficult to get the reader excited about it. (However, if you feel too passionately about a topic, you may find it difficult to be objective.)
- **You have something to say about the question** You should be confident that you can relate the question to the ideas you have covered in TOK, the subjects you study and your own experience.

Brainstorming

You might want to use standard brainstorming techniques to come up with ideas on your chosen question. Begin by scribbling down everything that comes to mind when you think about the question *without passing judgement on the quality of the ideas*. Then evaluate the ideas and discard those which are weak or irrelevant. Finally, think about how your ideas are related to one another and organise them into about six main points with related sub-points clustered around them. (You might find it useful to visualise the relationships between your ideas by making a mind map.)

Since a TOK essay is primarily a **reflective** essay, do not start by consulting a textbook as you may be over-influenced by what you read and be inhibited from coming up with your own ideas. As the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) observed: ‘It is dangerous to read about a subject before we have thought about it ourselves . . . When we read, another person thinks for us; we merely repeat his mental process.’ So have the courage to think for yourself and try to map out your own response to the question before looking at what other people have said about it.

Practice

Since you can develop and improve your essay-writing skills only through practice, you will need to write at least one **practice essay** and look carefully at the feedback you get from your teacher. You should also read an **exemplar essay** and make sure you understand why it received the grade it did.

Quick tip Whenever you are working on your essay, have in front of you: (a) a copy of the TOK diagram; (b) a brief ‘key words’ summary of the assessment criteria. This will help to keep you focused on what needs to be done.

How to write an essay

A necessary – but not sufficient – condition for a good TOK essay is that it is a good *essay*. An essay is more than a series of statements loosely connected to the question. A good essay in any subject should minimally be (a) well structured; (b) clearly written.

Structure

An essay's structure is what holds it together and gives it a sense of direction. You will need to think carefully about how to order your key points so that they flow naturally and help the reader to follow your argument. Here are some points you should keep in mind:

1 Introduction

An introduction can be thought of as a contract between writer and reader. You tell the reader what you are going to do and then in the body of your essay you deliver the goods. There are three things you should try to do in your introduction: get the reader's attention; explain what you understand by the question; briefly outline how you plan to tackle it.

One way of arousing the reader's interest is to begin with something surprising or puzzling. Take, for example, the question 'Compare the roles played by reason and imagination in at least two Areas of Knowledge.' You might begin with the following anecdote: 'When the German mathematician David Hilbert (1862–1943) was told that one of his students had given up mathematics to become a novelist, he said, "It is just as well – he did not have any imagination!"' This is surprising because we usually identify mathematics with reason, and literature with imagination. So we begin to wonder what Hilbert meant by this comment and how, if at all, it could be justified.

When it comes to explaining what you understand by the question, you might want to:

- formulate it in your own words (but be careful not to change its meaning)
- indicate key terms that are unclear or ambiguous (what is meant by 'reason'?)
- say why the question is interesting or important (perhaps it challenges an entrenched stereotype).

You might also need to impose your own limits on the question. For example, if you tackle the question on reason and imagination, you might limit yourself to comparing the roles they play in mathematics and literature.

An introduction usually includes a **thesis statement**. This is the fundamental claim you are making in your essay and is the thread which runs through it and holds everything together. With reference to the above essay, your thesis might be that reason and imagination play an important role in both mathematics and literature but, while the imaginative insights of mathematicians must ultimately be *provable*, those of novelists need only be *reasonable*. In planning your essay, the thesis will probably be the last thing you come up with and you may find that you modify it in writing your first draft. (Note that there is more than one way of writing a good essay: instead of putting your thesis in the introduction, you may decide to build to it and put it in your conclusion.)

2 Paragraphs

The point of breaking an essay into paragraphs is not to make the pages look pretty, but to signal the introduction of major new points in your argument. A well-constructed paragraph typically consists of a cluster of arguments and evidence that bear directly on a specific sub-theme. You might think of it as a mini-essay with a

beginning, middle and end and its own clear line of development. Ideally, you should begin with a **topic sentence** which, as the name implies, sets up a new topic for analysis; and end with a sentence which makes clear how it contributes to the development of the thesis.

When it comes to the length and order of your paragraphs, three points are worth mentioning:

- Devote more space to important points and less to minor ones, and avoid getting sidetracked by trivial or irrelevant details.
- Pay particular attention to the *transitions* between your paragraphs and organise them in such a way that one flows smoothly into the next.
- Think of your readers and help them by occasionally signposting where you are in the overall development of your argument.

3 Conclusion

To prevent your essay ending abruptly, you should write a conclusion which draws things together and gives your reader a sense of closure. Rather than repeating what you have already said, try to find a new way of formulating your key insights. You might also mention unresolved issues and the broader implications of your argument. Think in particular about your final sentence: a striking and well-crafted last sentence acts as an effective full stop and helps to give your reader a positive overall impression of your essay.

Quick tip Get someone to read the first and last sentence of each paragraph of your essay. If it is well structured, this should be enough to give them an idea of its main points.

Style

Different styles are appropriate to different tasks. I would summarise good essay-writing style in three words: clarity, economy and precision.

1 Clarity

Since your goal as a writer is to communicate, the onus is on you to ensure that the reader can follow what you are saying. Some people confuse clarity with superficiality, and obscurity with depth. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it requires real depth to write with clarity and a great deal of hard work to make writing look easy. (As Samuel Johnson, 1709–1784, once observed: ‘What is written without pain is read without pleasure.’) A pompous, convoluted jargon-ridden style will not only lose your readers, it will also lose you marks; for you will get no credit for writing something that no one can understand.

2 Economy

Since you are writing to a 1,600 word limit, it is important that you make every word count. Although your essay should flow, you should try to express yourself succinctly and eliminate the extravagant use of adjectives and other unnecessary words. Guard in particular against: (a) elaborate throat-clearing – especially in your introduction; (b) irrelevant padding; (c) pointless repetition. When you have written a first draft, go through each sentence and ask yourself: (i) *Does it say*

anything? (ii) *Is it relevant to my argument?* If you cannot answer 'yes' to both questions you should strike the sentence from your essay.

3 Precision

Since there is a danger of a TOK essay floating off into empty abstractions, you should, where possible, try to be precise rather than vague. Three points are worth making here:

- Avoid *death by a thousand qualifications*. While you may need to qualify some of your assertions, if you are too vague and hedge them around with too many qualifications, you will end up not saying anything.
- Choose your language with care and be aware of subtle differences in the meanings of words. There is, for example, a difference between *belief* and *faith*; and a *generalisation* is not the same thing as a *stereotype*.
- Be particularly cautious with words like 'clearly', 'proves' and 'all', which are often misused or inadequately justified.

Quick tip When you have finished your essay, read it out loud to yourself. This is a good way of seeing how well it flows and whether there is a natural rhythm to what you have written.

Factual accuracy and references

Since TOK can be corrosive of accepted truths, it is important to keep in mind that there *is* a difference between a fact and an opinion: as the US senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1927–2003) once observed, 'Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.' In your essay you cannot simply help yourself to 'facts' that are patently false. Since, for example, the atomic number of gold is 79, you cannot announce that it is 52. At the same time, you should keep in mind that some alleged facts may turn out not to be facts at all. Despite being widely believed, it is not the case that we use only 10 per cent of our brains or that the Great Wall of China is the only man-made object visible from space.

You may need to include some references in your essay to show the source of your information. While there is no hard and fast rule about when this should be done, here are some guidelines:

- You should reference surprising, counter-intuitive or little-known claims, but not well-known facts or commonly held opinions.
- If you are closely following another person's line of argument – albeit it in your own words – it is intellectual good manners to acknowledge them.
- If you are quoting someone's exact words, you should put the quotation in inverted commas and reference it.

You can use any accepted referencing system. All that matters is that the reader should be able to trace the source of your information and check its accuracy. Try to be consistent in the way you reference; and if you are citing a website, remember to include the date you accessed it.

Key features of a TOK essay

The points we have made so far are relevant to writing a good essay in any subject. We now need to talk more specifically about what makes a good essay a good *TOK* essay.

Content

Despite being an unusual subject, TOK does have a specific content – not in the sense of a syllabus to be memorised and reproduced, but in the sense of a range of questions to be explored and reflected on. (The *IBO Teachers' Guide to TOK* consists almost entirely of questions.)

From the start, you need to be clear about what distinguishes a TOK essay from a *subject-specific essay* on the one hand and a *general essay* on the other. Here are three pointers:

- 1 **TOK is focused on knowledge issues** The central question in TOK is ‘*How do you know?*’ and the course asks you to assess the strengths and weaknesses of knowledge claims in various Areas of Knowledge.
- 2 **TOK deals with second-order questions** TOK is not primarily concerned with first-order questions *within* a subject – e.g. ‘What were the causes of the First World War?’ – but with second-order questions *about* a subject – e.g. ‘How, if at all, can the past be known?’
- 3 **TOK is interdisciplinary and comparative** TOK asks you to compare and contrast various sources and types of knowledge.

To write an essay that is sufficiently rich in TOK content, you will be expected to demonstrate a *detailed understanding* of the ways of knowing and areas of knowledge you choose to discuss. Above all, avoid vague, superficial, cliché-ridden characterisations of, say, mathematics, the natural sciences, or the arts. For it is impossible to give a worthwhile analysis of a subject you do not understand properly.

Since the lifeblood of TOK is **critical thinking**, you should also ensure that *description is always a prelude to analysis*. You might, for example, briefly describe the theory of evolution in order to analyse the extent to which it is a genuine scientific theory. But, if you find yourself writing at length about Darwin’s adventures on HMS *Beagle*, you have drifted on to the reef of descriptive irrelevance and will, assuredly, be shipwrecked.

Quick tip Ask yourself if your essay could have been written by someone who has not followed the TOK course. If the answer is ‘yes’, then it does not contain enough TOK content.

Personal thought

In writing a TOK essay, a mixture of insecurity and inertia might tempt you to follow doggedly in another person’s footsteps and do little more than recycle their thoughts and opinions. Given the importance that the IBO place on *personal* thought, you

should resist this temptation and limit any recycling urge to your dealings with household garbage.

According to assessment-criterion B, you must demonstrate ‘independent thinking’ and shape your essay ‘in a way that shows both a personal, reflective exploration of the knowledge issues and significant self-awareness as a knower’. Such talk can sound intimidating, but the expectation is not that you come up with a Big Idea that no one has thought of before (unlikely) or summarise your personal philosophy of life, the universe and everything (undesirable). What is required is that you show personal thought in a variety of more modest ways – such as:

- the position you take
- the points you raise
- the way you organise them
- the comparisons you make
- your choice of examples
- your use of language
- your awareness of bias.

Keep in mind that an accumulation of small examples of personal thought will, when taken together, give your essay a distinctive voice. Once you start to focus on a specific question, you will find that new ideas occur to you in the process of planning and writing a draft, and you may be surprised by the freshness and originality of your final essay.

Definitions

There is a convention, with which you are probably familiar, that you should begin an essay by defining your terms. There are several dangers with this convention. The first is that, rather than making a judgement about what needs definition, you simply define everything in sight. The second is that you give facile dictionary definitions of key terms and then wash your hands of them. Part of the problem here is that many dictionary definitions are worthless. For example, defining knowledge as ‘the state or fact of knowing’ gets you nowhere because it is an empty truism. But the main point to grasp is that TOK is full of what might be called **contested concepts**. The hallmark of such concepts is that they are both important and up for grabs, in the sense that there are substantial disagreements about what they mean – disagreements that cannot be resolved simply by consulting a dictionary. There are numerous examples of such concepts: ‘knowledge’, ‘science’, ‘art’, ‘democracy’, ‘justice’, ‘love’, ‘terrorism’, etc. These concepts are worth arguing about because something hangs on how we define them. If, for example, ‘science’ is defined in such a way that astrology can be described as a science, then why not teach astrology as an IB subject? And if the Popular Front for the Liberation of Habagashi consists of freedom fighters rather than terrorists, then why should we fight them?

What emerges from this discussion is that if you define a word you need to show why the definition matters and what hangs on it. (If nothing hangs on it, then it is probably not worth defining.) Furthermore, you should think in terms not so much of pinning down the meaning of a word and drawing a circle round it as of **analysing a concept**. While you might *begin* with a preliminary definition, you

will probably need to refine it during the course of your essay. You might, for example, begin by saying that knowledge is commonly defined as justified true belief, and then find that you need to say more about what counts as an adequate justification. The point, in short, is that a definition should be the beginning rather than the end of reflection.

Instead of relying on a dictionary to elucidate a concept, you might adopt the following three-part strategy: (a) gather typical examples; (b) find common characteristics; (c) test your concept. If, for example, you are trying to analyse the word 'art', think of some iconic works of art, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, or Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, or Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Then ask yourself what they have in common that justifies our calling them all 'art'. You might say that they all exemplify beauty, or show skill, or appeal to our emotions. So far, so good; but don't stop there. You now need to test your idea by trying to think of counter-examples. Can you think of examples of things that are not beautiful, nor skilful, nor emotionally engaging that you would still want to call art? . . . From this brief sketch, you can see that you are now on the way to a much richer discussion of the nature of art than anything that can be conjured out of a dictionary.

Arguments

Some students do poorly in their TOK essay because they do not know what an argument is. An argument is not a series of statements loosely related to a theme, but – to quote a famous Monty Python sketch – 'a connected series of statements intended to establish a definite proposition'. While loosely related statements merely state things, an argument gives reasons (premises) to support a claim (conclusion). To see the difference, compare the following two sets of statements:

- 1 Astrology is the belief that the position of the stars at the time of your birth affects your destiny. There are ten times more astrologers than astronomers in the United States. Despite its popularity, astrology cannot be classified as a science.
- 2 One of the hallmarks of a genuine science is that it makes testable predictions. Admittedly, astrologers do make predictions, but they are so vague that they cannot be verified or falsified. So, unlike astronomy, astrology cannot be classified as a science.

The difference between (1) and (2) is that, while (1) makes three unrelated assertions about astrology, (2) makes a claim – 'Astrology cannot be classified as a science' – that is supported by reasons.

There is a simple test – called the *therefore test* – for determining whether or not a series of statements constitutes an argument. If you can put a *therefore* in front of one of the statements and the series makes sense, then it is an argument. (You may need to reorder the statements if the claim is in the beginning or the middle of the series.) You can see that, while (2) passes the 'therefore' test, there is no way of ordering the statements in (1) so that it would make sense to put a 'therefore' in front of one of them. If you make such a series of unsubstantiated assertions in your essay, then – even if they are vaguely relevant to the title – you will get no credit for them.

Quick tip When you have finished your essay, go through it and make explicit all of the implicit theorems. This will enable you to see how many arguments your essay contains.

Evidence

Even if the arguments in your essay are logically valid, they will only be as good as the reasons on which they are based. To return to argument (2) above – which is a valid argument – your readers will only find the conclusion convincing if they are willing to accept that science makes testable predictions and astrology does not. To give weight to your argument, you might want to flesh it out by comparing the kinds of predictions made in astronomy – e.g. ‘The next total solar eclipse will be on 1 August 2008’ – with those made in astrology – e.g. ‘An ambition that you thought was just a dream comes into much sharper focus in the week ahead.’

Since you cannot justify every assertion you make without getting caught in an infinite regress, you will need to make a judgement about which assertions need to be supported with further evidence and which can be accepted as ‘common knowledge’. As a rough guide, you should give supporting evidence if what you are saying is: (a) central to your argument; (b) disputable or surprising. The more that hangs on an assertion and the more disputable it is, the more evidence you should give in support of it. (As the astronomer Carl Sagan, 1934–1996, once observed: ‘Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.’)

You will also need to think about the *strength* of the evidence you appeal to. Some of it should be drawn directly from your own experience; but a lot will be derived from second-hand sources such as class notes, books, TV, newspapers, discussions with friends and acquaintances – and, of course, the Internet. Exercise caution here! Rather than accept the sources you use at face value, you should, where appropriate, be willing to question their reliability and trustworthiness. This is particularly necessary in the case of the Internet, which is now most people’s first port of call when seeking information. Keep in mind that, despite the existence of many good websites, the Internet is not an electronic oracle that infallibly dispenses truth.

What is required when using any of these sources is that you approach them *critically*. Ask questions such as: *Who says? Do they have the relevant expertise? Are they trustworthy? Do they have a vested interest? What’s the evidence? How plausible is it? Do they show both sides? Do they use emotive language? Do other experts agree?*

Since evidence, whatever its source, is ultimately based on perception or reason or intuition, you may at some point want to discuss these ways of knowing in more detail. You might, for example, draw attention to the fallibility of perception, or the limitations of reason, or the unreliability of intuition. However, it is important that you do not confuse critical thinking with destructive thinking; and you should, where appropriate, draw attention to the strengths as well as the weaknesses of any such sources of knowledge. In particular, you should avoid a kind of **idiot scepticism** which mindlessly questions everything. Your goal is not to reduce the edifice of knowledge to rubble but to engage in the difficult task of distinguishing between more and less reasonable claims to knowledge.

Counter-arguments

Your TOK essay should not just consist of arguments backed up by evidence: you must also consider counter-arguments. To the extent that you question the strength of your supporting evidence (see above), there is likely to be a natural movement from argument to counter-argument. To help this movement, try to think of your essay not so much as a monologue but as a *dialogue*. Ideally, it should contain two (or more) voices, one proposing various arguments and the other opposing and suggesting alternatives. Since controversial issues are the meat and potatoes of TOK, you should be able to find at least two sides to every question. If you have kept good notes from TOK class discussions, then you will have a preliminary bank of arguments and counter-arguments on which to draw. You should be able to supplement this through background reading, trying out arguments on friends, and – above all – personal thought. If you cannot think of any counter-arguments to what you are saying, then it is probably so obvious that it is not worth arguing for at all. You should, however, avoid the **straw-man fallacy** of constructing and then demolishing weak or spurious counter-arguments. If you plan to take a position on an issue, the best way of carrying conviction is to show that it can withstand even the strongest criticism that can be levelled against it.

Once you have given a counter-argument, you will need to decide how it affects your original argument. There are two main types of response you can make:

- 1 **Refutation** You reject the counter-argument by showing that it is mistaken or unlikely or unimportant.
- 2 **Concession** You allow that there is some truth in the counter-argument and qualify your original argument to take account of it.

Here are two abbreviated examples to illustrate each of the above patterns of response:

- 1 We usually assume that human beings are capable of genuine altruism (*claim*); but it could be argued that even so-called altruists are simply doing what they most want to do – and so, in a sense, are being selfish (*counter-claim*). However, if everything anyone ever does is described as selfish, this effectively robs the word ‘selfish’ of its meaning (*refutation*).
- 2 The language of universal human rights reflects a widespread belief that values are objective (*claim*); but some people argue that the sheer diversity of moral practices means that there are in fact no objective values (*counter-claim*). Admittedly, different cultures have very different views about, for example, sexual morality (*concession*); but I would still argue that there are some core values common to all societies (*qualification of claim*).

These examples are just rough sketches and they would need to be fleshed out to carry any conviction in an essay; but they should at least give you an idea of how you might respond to counter-arguments.

Sound reasoning

The arguments you use in your essay will not get you very far unless they are *good* arguments. To avoid sloppy reasoning, check that the claims you make are

supported by the reasons you give for them. Guard, in particular, against the following commonly committed errors:

- **Hasty generalisation** This is the fallacy of generalising from insufficient evidence. Above all, avoid superficial caricatures of subject areas and cultures.
- **Black-and-white thinking** This is the fallacy of going from one extreme to the other. For example, just because we cannot achieve certainty, it does not follow that any opinion is as good as any other.
- **Inconsistency** Check the overall consistency of your essay and ensure that your various points do not contradict one another.

Quick tip Go through your essay and highlight every generalisation (e.g. 'All scientists . . .', 'All Buddhists . . .'). Check that they have been properly justified.

Depth

Your TOK essay may be focused on knowledge issues and contain sound arguments supported by evidence, but if it comes across as *thin* it will still not achieve a top grade. You need to give it *weight*. In general, the more good points you make, the better you are likely to do. (However, keep in mind that such points will only have value if they are crafted into a meaningful whole.)

In writing your essay, you might think of yourself as operating with two different lenses: a zoom for depth and a wide-angle for breadth.

Depth is about *taking your analysis to the next level*. Among the factors you might think about here are:

- 1 **Depth of dialogue** Try to extend your dialogues beyond the cursory ping-pong of argument and counter-argument, and think of a response to the counter-argument and a counter-response to that. You will, of course, need to think about: (a) the quality as well as the quantity of such exchanges; (b) at what point to bring them to a close (this is likely to depend on how important the particular argument is to your overall thesis).
- 2 **Weight of evidence** The more supporting evidence you can give for your arguments the more conviction they will carry. For example, if you are trying to argue that literature contributes to our knowledge of the world, then saying that it not only illuminates the human condition but also teaches us sensitivity to language is probably better than making only one of these points.
- 3 **Relevant distinctions** Introducing relevant distinctions will add subtlety and finesse to your argument. You might, for example, distinguish between **knowing how** and **knowing that**; or between **inductive reasoning** and **deductive reasoning**; or between an **empirical proposition** and a **metaphysical proposition**. You should also be aware that when you talk about an area of knowledge such as, say, the arts, there are many different art forms, and that what holds true of one will not necessarily hold true of another.
- 4 **Key implications** By exploring the implications of your argument, you show that you are thinking around the issue. Ask yourself *what follows* from the point you are considering. For example, you might argue that:

- If knowledge is equated with certainty, then *it follows that* we know almost nothing.
- If all values are relative, then *it follows that* we can no longer speak of universal human rights.
- If human free will is an illusion, then *it follows that* we can no longer hold people responsible for their actions.

5 Background assumptions Ask yourself *What assumptions am I making here?* and, where appropriate, be willing to question them. Since we often confuse what is cultural with what is natural, and unthinkingly assume that the practices we have grown up with are 'normal', you should pay particular attention to any cultural biases that may be colouring your analysis.

Breadth

When it comes to breadth, you should think in terms of *making connections*. As was mentioned earlier, TOK essays are usually comparative in nature and you will be expected to consider the *similarities and differences* between various ways of knowing and different Areas of Knowledge. As a brainstorming exercise, you should be able to think of an interesting link between any given word on the TOK diagram and every other word on it. This will help to get you thinking in a sufficiently broad way. You must then decide which of these connections are relevant to your chosen question. You will also need to ensure that you do not achieve breadth at the expense of depth. If, for example, you tackle the question mentioned earlier, 'Compare the roles played by reason and imagination in at least two Areas of Knowledge', I would suggest that you consider two or three Areas of Knowledge but do not try to cover all six. To attempt the latter in 1,600 words is to condemn yourself to writing an essay that is nothing more than a superficial survey of the territory.

As well as making connections within the TOK diagram, you should also try to come up with some *different perspectives* on your chosen topic. To do this, you might ask yourself *How would an X look at this?* where *an X* is someone of a different age, gender, profession, culture, or historical era. (You could even ask how an animal or a Martian would look at whatever it is!) This will help you to think beyond the confines of your own viewpoint and may bring to light hidden assumptions in your own thinking.

Examples

In your essay, you are expected to give examples that are 'varied and effectively used'. Such examples will add colour and conviction to your writing and help the reader to grasp some of your more abstract points. There are a number of factors to keep in mind here:

- 1 Hypothetical examples** While occasional thought experiments have their place, real examples generally carry more conviction than manufactured, hypothetical ones.
- 2 Clichéd examples** 'A bachelor is an unmarried man' is not the only example of a statement that is true by definition; and Copernicus' 'revolutionary' claim that the Earth goes round the Sun, rather than vice versa, is not the only example of a paradigm shift.

- 3 **Representative examples** Try to ensure that your examples are *representative* so that you do not distort things by focusing only on extreme cases.
- 4 **Varied examples** Try to take examples drawn from different sources such as: personal experience, the news media, different subject areas and a variety of cultures.
- 5 **Brevity of examples** Keep your examples relatively brief and make sure that they illustrate what they are supposed to illustrate.
- 6 **Examples vs statistics** Keep in mind that, as Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809–1894) once observed, ‘Most people reason dramatically, not quantitatively.’ A colourful anecdote may be rhetorically convincing, but in some cases dry statistics are a more reliable guide to the truth.

Quotations

You may wish to include a few well-chosen quotations in your essay, but you should be aware of two common pitfalls:

- 1 **Cut-and-paste essays** Make sure your essay does not degenerate into a cut-and-paste montage. While two or three short quotations are one thing, an essay that is stitched together out of other people’s words is quite another. You will get no credit for such intellectual ventriloquism.
- 2 **Undigested quotations** Rather than simply *parachuting* quotations into your essay, try to integrate them into the flow of your argument. In particular, keep in mind that *a quotation is a provocation not a proof* and that a telling quotation is not in itself enough to clinch an argument. Given this, you should be willing to subject quotations to critical scrutiny. For example, if you quote John Keats (1795–1821), “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know’, you cannot simply let the quotation speak for itself and then start a new paragraph. For, as it stands, it is clearly false. After all, there are many beautiful things – such as the Venus de Milo – that are not true, and many truths – such as the Holocaust – that are not beautiful. Perhaps there is a more interesting interpretation of what Keats said; but, if that is the case, you will need to convince the reader of it.

Note According to the IBO definition, **plagiarism** is ‘the representation of the ideas or work of another person as the candidate’s own’. If you are found to have plagiarised in the TOK essay you submit for assessment, you will not be awarded your diploma. To avoid plagiarism, the IBO says that: ‘Candidates must always ensure that they acknowledge fully and in detail the words and/or ideas of another person.’ Be punctilious here and, when you quote another person, be sure that you put their words in inverted commas and give appropriate references.

Just do it!

You may have planned your essay and have a good outline, yet still find it difficult to settle down to writing it. The best way to overcome the unsettling feeling of vertigo we all experience when staring at a blank sheet of paper is to start filling it with words. Not only will this give you confidence, you will also find that new ideas

occur to you in the very process of writing. Indeed, there is a sense in which *writing is a way of thinking*. (William Faulkner, 1897–1962, once said: ‘I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say.’) So start getting words on paper; you can always go back later and revise them.

Your essay will probably have to go through *several drafts* before you are happy with it; so get started well before the deadline. Try to become your own best critic. When you have a good draft, put it away for a few days; then return to it and read it with fresh eyes. This should help you to spot any outstanding weaknesses and errors in your work.

Keep in mind that you should write between 1,200 and 1,600 words and that you will be penalised if you transgress the word limit. While you should focus on quality rather than quantity, the more top-quality work you produce, the more impressed the examiner is likely to be.

Good Luck!