

Preparing for the TOK essay

It is important to note that this is not the definitive word on essay preparation as teachers approach this task in a range of different ways. Further to this, it should be noted that the skills that students bring to the task are developed over the course of the programme and that students cannot effectively respond to this task unless those skills and understandings have been effectively taught.

Students who produce their essays without adequate preparation may fail to:

- fully consider the implications of the title
- apply it to their own experiences
- research and unpack relevant examples
- arrive at a complex understanding of the criteria that they are addressing
- meaningfully reflect on the response that they are formulating
- draw from their course experience
- fully consider the implications of the knowledge issues that the title addresses
- phrase their response in a manner that allows them to maximize use of the word limit that the task is governed by.

Breaking the task down into stages

Teachers should give thought to breaking the task down into stages. One suggested breakdown would be the following stages:

- interpret the title
- define the key terms and concepts in the title
- identify the knowledge questions that are central to the discussion
- state a position
- identify the ways of knowing that are most significant to the discussion
- identify the areas of knowledge that will be central to the response
- identify the significant claims and counterclaims.

Interpret the title

Students often complete and submit their TOK essays having only arrived at a broad superficial understanding of the title that they are addressing. This commonly leads to essays that fail to address the title, or that quickly deviate from the title.

In many instances students produce wordy and descriptive essays because they are actually attempting to arrive at an understanding of the title while in the process of completing their responses. For this reason a strong starting point is to simply invite students to rephrase the title in their own terms, “I believe that this title is stating ...”

If students find it difficult to explain the title in their own terms, or even are initially unable to do this, the experience itself will encourage detailed discussion of the title which will deepen their understanding and ensure that the rest of the process is more meaningful and productive.

Define the key terms and concepts in the title

While lengthy dictionary definitions of terms are often a feature of weak descriptive responses, essays that fail to consider the central terms and concepts also tend not to explore the knowledge questions raised by the title. If the student is presented with a title which includes a phrase such as “There are no absolute distinctions between what is true and what is false” they will need to arrive at some personal understanding of the terms “absolute”, “distinction”, “true” and “false”.

Strong essays will often produce ongoing consideration of the key concepts in the title, possibly establishing that what is true for one context such as ethics may vary from what is true in another such as mathematics. Students who skip past this process are at great risk of overlooking key parts of the question or of producing responses without having fully understood the title itself. Students who define these terms in their own words are more likely to quickly take control of the essay and tend more often to produce essays that demonstrate personal engagement.

Identify the knowledge questions that are central to the discussion

Students should then be invited to formally identify the knowledge questions related to the title. If they do this they are far more likely to make effective use of the examples that they incorporate into their essay and they will be better equipped to respond to the title as a discussion of knowledge claims and their implications.

State a position

In most instances TOK titles invite students to adopt a position with respect to the title:

- I agree
- I disagree
- I agree with reservations
- I disagree to an extent.

If students are required to adopt a position then they are better equipped to recognize their response as a discussion of knowledge that naturally invites counterclaims and they are less likely to gravitate to the format that remains most familiar to them, the opinion essay. Students who formalize their position are also less likely to produce lengthy, generalized and descriptive introductions that use up space in the essay and limit the likelihood of establishing a knowledge agenda.

Identify the ways of knowing that are most significant to the discussion

Some prescribed titles specify which or how many WOKs should be addressed. However, others leave it to the students to decide which WOKs to include. As the TOK essay is only a maximum 1,600 words, it is not possible to cover all of the WOKs in depth in a single essay. Students should be encouraged to identify which WOKs they will focus on from the beginning, as this tends to produce a more focused in-depth response. It is suggested that students should select two or three WOKs which allows for effective contrasts to be made.

Identify the areas of knowledge that will be central to the response

Some prescribed titles specify which or how many AOKs should be addressed. However, others leave it to the students to decide which AOKs to cover. Essays that seek to address too many AOKs tend to become overloaded and consequently lose depth. For that reason, students can benefit from making an initial decision of which AOKs to include, perhaps the two AOKs they feel are most relevant and helpful to their response.

Identify the significant claims and counterclaims

Students must be able to develop claims in response to the knowledge questions through reasoned argument and the use of appropriate real-world examples. Students may need help in producing argumentative essays. To access the highest markbands for the essay students must explicitly, and in detail, explore counterclaims.

Example of the steps at work

If we go back to the question “There are no absolute distinctions between what is true and what is false” we should see a set of notes that looks something like the following.

Interpret the title: I think this title is stating that you can't really cut a clean line between what is true and what is false, that there is a sort of grey line between them where things are relatively true or relatively false, as opposed to a clean border where you cross over into the world of trueness.

Define the key terms and concepts in the title:

- Absolute: Something that is complete and unequivocal, not something that has fuzzy edges.
- Distinction: Being able to tell one thing from the other.
- False: Something that is not true. This can be something that is believed, at the time to be true, but later gets disproven. If this occurs then, even though it was believed it was, all that time, false.
- True: Something that is justifiable and believable. In this case it could be something that you can show to people or that you can sufficiently justify.

Identifying the knowledge questions: The title is inviting me to consider what truth and falseness are and whether or not they remain absolute across time, in different areas of knowledge and even in different cultures.

State a position: I mostly agree with this. I think that true and false are spectrums but I only agree to an extent because I acknowledge that this is less so in some areas of knowledge than it is in others.

Identify the key WOKs: I think that this applies to all of the WOKs, but the most significant ones to consider are reason, emotion and sense perception.

Identify the AOKs: I intend to use mathematics, science and history to illustrate my response.

Identify the most significant claims and counterclaims: The key counterclaim that I will use is that in mathematics equations are generally regarded as clearly either true or false but I will show that in some cases an equation can be both.

Brainstorming and organizing ideas

If students have effectively established the parameters for discussion then they should come to this stage of their preparation with much more focus. It is important that this stage of the process is completed independently from establishing the parameters for discussion and it helps if students can complete it over a number of days. If more time is given to this then students are often able to generate more ideas, locate better examples, discuss the question with more people such as their parents, and eventually provide themselves with a better range of ideas to draw from. It is important for students to put down all the ideas that they think they can use, even if they initially seem a bit strange. Students should be encouraged to avoid editing out ideas during this stage.

Researching examples

Some students will choose to do this as part of their brainstorming but it generally makes more sense for students to research their examples after they have decided on the points that they seek to make. One of the most common causes for weak essay responses stems from the poor selection of examples. For this reason it is worth approaching this as an overt skill and ensuring that students are directed to sites and resources (magazines, documentaries, books and so on) that are likely to furnish them with interesting and relevant examples to use. This stage of the process can provide TOK teachers with an excellent opportunity to engage other DP teachers, allowing students to discuss their titles and the examples that they intend to use.

This process is central to the production of an engaged and detailed response. It also consumes a great deal of time. For that reason it is often advisable to allow sufficient time but to stipulate a time by which students should have located the examples that they intend to use.

Planning and structuring the essay

Once students have completed this much preparation, they should be well placed to prepare a visual plan of the essay that they are going to complete. An effective way to do this is to have students create text boxes that represent each paragraph of the essay, beginning with a declarative, knowledge-focused opening statement that links clearly to the title.

Producing thorough structured essay plans provides a number of advantages to students.

- It allows for reflection and peer assessment at a stage where the essay is still quite fluid.
- It enables students to easily make significant changes to the content and the order of the essay.
- It teaches students to approach the essay with an awareness of the available word limit.
- It enables students to easily jettison additional or unnecessary points.
- It helps students to create clear lines between the title, the opening statements and the examples.
- It allows students to quickly define the points that they seek to make, leaving them the space they need to address the knowledge implications that the examples illustrate.

Once students have dedicated this much thought to the process they should then progress to a working draft of the essay.

Editing and reviewing the essay

In addition to planning, an important stage in writing the essay that is often neglected is allowing sufficient time for editing or reviewing the essay. Students tend to edit most effectively if they are able to leave their essay for a while and come back to it with fresh eyes.