

## **TOK essays: What Do TOK Examiners Look For?**

By Will Everitt on 02-APR-2023 9:09 PM :

Deciphering the demands of the TOK essay can often seem like you're peering into a black box, reading tea leaves, or interpreting ley lines.

This year presented a chance for me to approach this task more systematically, seizing the opportunity to request examiner feedback on all of last October's submissions. As such, this month I took a deep dive and assessed for myself exactly what examiners reward, and penalise, when it comes to the TOK essay.

This blog post outlines my conclusions drawn from this analysis, plus pointers drawn from a TOK essay CPD session I attended last year.

### **Summary of findings:**

#### **Rewarded**

A sustained answer to the whole question

Points are clearly explained and justified.

Careful exploration of real examples

Higher-band essays will effectively explore implications of discussion given the context of the question, and briefly, knowledge more broadly.

#### **Penalised**

Question not, or only tangentially, addressed.

Points not clearly linked to the question, lacking clarity or sufficient justification.

Examples don't illustrate and demonstrate points made

Essay overall lacks coherence, points don't logically follow from each other.

### **Rationale behind essay**

The main objective of the TOK essay is for students to engage in a deep and extended thinking activity that explores an open-ended question. Consequently, and linked to the IB learner profile, the activity encourages critical thinking with an open mind adept at engaging with and evaluating different points of view.

This is a grand aim and conveys the laudable ambition to promote considered and balanced reasoning whilst avoiding the pitfalls of polemics and dogma. Fine. Yet, my role as a TOK practitioner is to deconstruct the task further and explain to my students exactly how they can demonstrate this attitude and skills on the page.

### **Focus on the rubric**

Often, I've heard the mantra that, in seeking to understand what is required, look no further than the essay rubric, the top band being:

The discussion has a sustained focus on the title and is linked effectively to areas of knowledge. Arguments are clear, coherent and effectively supported by specific examples. The implications of arguments are considered. There is clear awareness and evaluation of different points of view. (IB Guide, 2022)

Unequivocal as this is, I often fail to explain definitively how this translates into the grades awarded. In other words, my challenge as a teacher is to unlock what the phrases - 'sustained focus', 'linked effectively', 'arguments are considered' - mean in practice when interpreting students' work. The TOK essay is marked using a global impression marking approach, meaning that examiners evaluate scripts holistically against the rubric. Therefore, another way of framing the demands of the task is through the following driving question: **Does the student provide a clear, coherent and critical exploration of the essay title?** (TOK Cat 3 Workshop, 2022)

### **The question is everything**

A careful and considered interpretation of the question is imperative. Likewise, links between the essay question and arguments made in the response must be clear; if there is ambiguity, links must be explained and justified. Discussions that stray from the question are invariably picked up by examiners and criticised.

I strongly advise my students to frame their interpretation using one or two of the 12 TOK concepts and to explain this interpretation at the outset. Conceding that some time may be spent on interpreting keywords, best practice always is to assess the question holistically.

### **Ensuring clarity and coherence**

As with the need to clearly explain the interpretation of the question and how the essay's discussion addresses this, the essay itself must also be clear. To ensure clarity:

- All arguments and concepts need to be clearly explained. This is equally pertinent for stronger as well as weaker essays where candidates can capitalise on opportunities to explain more esoteric ideas or concepts.
- Links between examples cited and theory points need to be explained and justified.
- Arguments need to be cogent, justified, and express a point that is relevant to the question. If in doubt, the relevance of the point for the question needs to be explained. In other words, non sequiturs and extraneous discussion must be avoided.
- A final way to bolster clarity is to repeat language taken from the question, such as when introducing new points and paragraphs.

As with the demand for clarity, a coherent essay should also be logically valid, easy to follow and good essays will exhibit continuity where the exploration, discussion and thinking hangs together as a cohesive whole.

### **Critical exploration**

Differing from the previous syllabus and rubric, there is no requirement to follow a claim-counterclaim structure, yet the insistence on recognising different points of view very much remains. Examiners are looking for candidates to judge and evaluate their arguments and examples continually throughout the essay. Consequently, responses need to evidence an openness to alternative approaches worthy of consideration. Better essays will move beyond a mere awareness of different points of view, but also will evaluate alternative perspectives.

Top-band work must also consider the implications of the arguments outlined, TOK theory referenced, and connected examples. This can be in the context of the particular essay question or in terms of knowledge generally, beyond the confines of the specific areas of knowledge discussed.

### **Substantive and disciplinary knowledge**

At its heart, TOK is about the notion that all subjects employ conceptual frameworks in the production of knowledge claims. These frameworks not only vary from one discipline to another, but also within any one discipline, different ways of conceiving phenomena are apparent. Thus, conflicting knowledge claims often are the result of preferences for different analytical frameworks employed to analyse the same phenomena.

Counsell (2018) outlines a pedagogical framework that distinguishes between 'substantive and disciplinary knowledge'. Substantive knowledge encompasses the content that is taught as established facts; disciplinary knowledge is about the methodologies adopted to produce knowledge and the qualities such knowledge claims possess. Applying this framework, when it comes to analysing the five areas of knowledge, TOK is acutely concerned with disciplinary knowledge, encouraging students to explore how knowledge is established and revised as well as describing the nature of claims in terms of certainty, objectivity, and truth.

Turning this framework towards TOK itself, it's fair to say that the substantive knowledge element corresponds to the analytical framework adopted. In my TOK teaching, the analytical framework has three parts: the 12 TOK concepts, the methods of knowing, and the five areas of knowledge. Disciplinary knowledge for TOK, then, is the ability to apply such an analytical framework in order to respond to a knowledge question. Additionally, disciplinary knowledge encompasses the ability to express this analysis in a way that is evaluative, coherent and clearly expressed.

### **References**

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