

The essay process

Although you might be tempted to grab the first likely looking title and start writing your essay, we suggest it is far better to approach the task in six stages:

Unpack the six titles → Choose your title → Consider elements to include → Organize these into an exploration of the title → Plan out the essay in detail → Write the essay

We will concentrate mostly on the first three stages for two reasons. Firstly, if you unpack the titles carefully, choose the one that suits you best and consider what to include well, then you are very likely to find the organizing of your exploration and planning comes far more easily and that it leads to good quality analysis and writing. Secondly, we can offer general procedures for these first three, but how to explore, plan and write your essay will depend quite a lot on the details of your unpacking and initial brainstorming of ideas.

As you work through this process, you will need to comment on it at three times, using the TK/PPF form. The first time is when you consult your teacher about your choice of title, the second is when you show your teacher your exploration/plan, and the third when you and your teacher discuss your full draft. Finally, you must sign this form to verify that you have accurately described the process of writing your essay.

Unpacking the titles

Before choosing your TOK essay title, you will need to know what each of them contains. The six titles offered cover a range of focuses and styles, each asking or indicating different knowledge questions and inviting different considerations when you write your essay. Although the outward appearance of some of the titles may appear daunting at first, you will find when you unpack the title and look more carefully that you come across very familiar TOK contents such as the AOKs and related aspects of the knowledge framework, the WOKs, the differences between personal and shared knowledge, or key TOK concepts such as certainty, reliability, truth, validity, context or culture. It makes sense to take a careful look through the six titles and pick the one that suits you and your understanding of TOK best. Don't choose a title whose contents are unfamiliar to you!

What can be found in titles

To begin unpacking a title, you need to inspect the items that you find inside it. You need to identify which items are essential ones and how they are connected. While they differ in detail, though, all TOK essay titles share basic features with other titles. They all:

- arise from the TOK course
- contain references to key TOK elements and concepts

- contain command terms (words that indicate to you what your task is)
- point to one or more knowledge questions
- can be linked to your other IB Diploma Programme studies
- allow different, equally valid, approaches in the essay.

In addition, some allow a certain amount of ambiguity in how the title (or some key term) is to be understood, or are based on certain assumptions that may need investigation.

Unpacking the title means examining, clarifying and investigating all these central items in each particular title, and looking at how they all fit together. Later in this chapter, we provide kits to take you through a process of unpacking the essential features and requirements of a range of essay titles from recent past prescribed title lists. We suggest that you look at these kits for more details on how to go about unpacking a title. The kits also illustrate some aspects of the title exploration phase. Finally, we provide you with authentic essays (written by previous students), accompanied by commentaries to highlight aspects that strengthened or weakened the essay.

Some unpacking suggestions can be applied to any TOK essay title, whereas others are more pertinent to certain titles. Therefore, we will take you through the main features of a variety of titles and the responses written to them. Once you have chosen your essay title from the current session's selection you can adapt our guidelines to unpacking all six titles, choose the one you will address, then brainstorm, explore, plan and write your own particular essay.

Be prepared

- Become aware of distinct features of each title, to help with the unpacking.
- Remember that the title is set in the context of TOK. Look for the connections between the title and TOK terms such as the AOKs and WOKs.
- Systematically unpack each title in the current selection, so that you know what it would require of you, if you chose it.
- Choose your title based on a deep understanding of each, not a superficial glance

Choosing your title

"I couldn't believe how difficult it was for me to choose a final title, but when I started to think about what I wanted to bring into my essay and what arguments I would enjoy developing, then I was able to make that choice." (Pedro)

In picking your title, you are looking for the best match of three things: the demands of the title, your understanding of TOK you have developed through your TOK course, and your own interests and knowledge (be it highly personal or shared with others). Your unpacking of the title will reveal the first to you. A backward look at your TOK course should highlight the types of knowledge questions in which you have gained experience. It will also show the aspects of areas of knowledge that you have investigated through the knowledge framework, thus enabling you to develop a particular interest in them. Reflecting on yourself as a knower and upon your knowledge shared with others, you will have discovered which areas of knowledge most excite your interest, what styles of knowing and learning you have gained through exploring these AOKs and through your studies across the IB Diploma Programme. Some titles will appeal more to your interests, experience and concerns. To help you choose your essay title, here is a selection of useful questions that you can ask yourself.

- What does each title want you to do?
- Do any of the titles link strongly to matters that you and your class covered in depth and detail?
- Do any of the titles suit your style of learning, for example, by requiring a more critical and rational, or a more creative and imaginative, approach?
- Would any of the titles allow you to focus on your academic strengths and interests, for example, the AOKs that cover subjects you are taking at higher level?
- Would any of the titles allow you to focus on the WOKs that are relevant to gaining knowledge in your studies and outside interests?
- For any of the titles, could you draw on your extended essay research, or your creativity, activity, service activities?
- Would any of the titles allow you to focus on your activities and projects outside school?

What other considerations might help you to choose the best title for you?

Be prepared

- **Read** carefully through the list of six prescribed titles.
- **Unpack** each to work out what it is asking you to do.
- **Discard** the titles you definitely do not want to answer.
- **Decide** which of the remaining titles interests you the most and suits you the best.

Develop an exploration document

Once you have chosen your prescribed essay title, what next? Clearly, your eventual aim is to write an essay of up to 1600 words on the title, but we strongly suggest that you do not begin writing straight away. Rather, you ought to brainstorm possible ideas, arrange those that you decide to use into an exploration document that shows how you will relate them to each other, and finally write a tight, coherent plan that sets out what you will do, paragraph by paragraph. For guidance in the exploration and planning stages, pay close attention to the requirements of the essay assessment instrument (see below). Writing the essay will then be much easier—and the essay will be better too.

Note that it is by no means essential to follow the order we suggest. Exploring and considering any of the items we discuss may bring to mind possible ideas and information of a different sort. Gathering material to help you develop your ideas for your basic line of argument will in turn suggest to you further ideas.

While your essay will be a response to the title written by the examiners, you will have to decide how to deal with it. You will need to address all the key items from the title, through one or more of the knowledge questions they raise. You will need to make links to at least some AOKs and WOKs. You have to inject into your essay analyses, arguments, explanations, explorations and examples. The essay must also invite the reader to see the issues from different perspectives, and it is essential that it contains some counter-arguments. Where will all these come from?

Unpack again

You have already unpacked the title once, when deciding which to choose. **Review** your unpacking of the title again: did you overlook anything important? Have you figured out which are the key TOK terms, what the command terms are asking you to do, what the major knowledge question is that you will address, whether the question is ambiguous, whether it makes assumptions you will want to question?

Although we will offer you some general rules for considering, unpacking, exploring and planning your essay in response to the prescribed title you chose, it is up to you to fill in the details. Draw on your IB studies, interests and experiences, including creativity, activity, service and your extended essay. Look at your life outside school. Think about your TOK classes, where you ought to have collected ideas, insights and reflections, possibly in a folder, journal or blog. These are a rich collection of background material that you need now to locate, assessing whether you may be able to adapt and apply them in your essay.

So, now **extend** your unpacking by **brainstorming** ideas related to your unpacking of the title. A brainstorm is a time for gathering together items that **might** be useful in your essay. You can start by jotting down ideas related to your unpacking of the title, but there is no need yet to assess how good they are.

- How could you use the key terms—what meanings will you have for them?
- On what central knowledge question will your essay be based? Exactly how might you word it?
- What subsidiary knowledge questions might you need to consider, in order to give a compelling answer to the title's main knowledge question?
- How will you make sure you achieve the tasks demanded by the command terms?
- What exactly does the title mean to you? How can you explain this to others—especially your readers?
- What ambiguity might the title contain? How will you interpret it?
- If there are any assumptions in the title, will you agree with, or question, them?
- Which AOKs, WOKs and/or key TOK-related terms might you discuss in relation to the title? What points might you make in your discussion of them? What counter arguments could you advance?
- What real life situations could you use as examples to support your points? Which counter-examples might you use?
- How might you introduce other perspectives?

Explore: consider and sift your ideas

Now is the time to go through all the ideas you have gathered. Which ones seem to be good? Which are you going to reject? Most important, from considering all this material, explore what your basic answer to the title and its knowledge question will be—that is, your thesis or major line of argument. You

should be aiming to be able to write this in a sentence. All the ideas you retain should be able to contribute to this line—even if they are there to deepen your analysis through questioning your conclusions.

A *word of advice* on the line of argument: you should come to a definite answer to the title. This does not mean that your answer has to be “yes, definitely” or “no, never”. In almost all cases, it should be more along the lines of “yes, in some cases, under these circumstances, to this extent, but not so much in these other cases” (or some other answer that recognizes complexity). We feel strongly that it should never be “who knows?” or “it all depends on your opinion”.

Finding your line of argument will help you to re-evaluate the jumble of ideas your brainstorm has produced. Which of them are central? Think about adding more detail, more examples. Which now seem to be irrelevant? Discard them.

Now, *organize* your remaining ideas under the guidance of your line of argument, using whatever method works for you—scribbling, using bullet points or a mind map, on paper or typing onto a computer. How will they fit together? You are aiming to produce an *exploration* of your response to the title, which lays out in front of you the possible contents and design for your essay, as preparation for the detailed planning stage. Think about how well your exploration will enable you to meet the requirements of the assessment instrument.

Discuss your exploration document with your teacher, taking careful note of the ideas and advice that arise in that conversation. Your teacher will be aiming to get you to think through more carefully the adequacy of your exploration of how you intend to address the title.

Planning your essay

“I found writing the essay was both like unravelling a ball of wool or making a collage, it was about analysing and argumentation, but it was also far more creative than I imagined it would be!” (Mia)

You have now gathered a range of ideas, main claims, some counter-claims and other material for your essay. You have thought about a unifying design to guide your planning, and have discussed this with your teacher. What next? The contents of the essay will need to be organized so that they are clearly visible and accessible to your reader. You can make sure that your ideas fit together well much better when you are working with a condensed plan than while writing full sentences and paragraphs. Your essay will need to be structured well, so that each paragraph leads naturally to the next as you develop depth and breadth. Although your essay will be uniquely yours, it will still need to meet the specifications contained in the essay assessment instrument.

Plan with the assessment guidelines in mind

"In my final year, my teacher went through the assessment guidelines with us and I made sure that I had a copy by me whilst I wrote my essay." (Inés)

Since all TOK essays are marked according to the essay assessment instrument (found towards the end of the TOK Guide) the assessment guidelines should be your constant companions. Familiarity with them will allow you to be more focused and organized in planning and developing your essay. They contain the key, essential parameters for an excellent essay, so keep them sharply in focus as you plan, expand and write.

The essay assessment instrument

Your examiner will mark your essay by assessing whether it presents "an appropriate and cogent analysis of knowledge questions in discussing the title". Therefore you must develop a meaningful, balanced and convincing argument in response to relevant knowledge questions explicit or implicit in the title.

Here are some key questions to ask yourself as you plan, and subsequently write, your essay.

- Are you sure that you know what the title you have chosen is about? That is, have you understood the proposition contained in the title?
- Have you understood some knowledge questions indicated explicitly or suggested implicitly in the title?
- When you discuss further, subsidiary knowledge questions, are the links to the main proposition made by the title clear?
- Have you developed a thorough, meaningful and convincing discussion around the above?

Check that you **meet** these basic requirements for writing your essay when you talk over your exploration with your teacher.

It is helpful for you to note that the questions fall into two pairs, one for each of the main aspects of the essay assessment instrument. Thus, you can think of your TOK essay as having **two main assessment aspects** that you should ensure you address well when planning and writing.

1. Aspect one regards how well you show in your essay that you recognize and understand the intent of the title and relevant knowledge questions.
2. Aspect two is about how well you analyse and discuss those knowledge questions in your essay.

In summary, you need to **pose** good, relevant, connected knowledge questions, and develop **answers** to them.

Two things to note:

- While the assessment instrument lists these two aspects, they are not two separate criteria. Roughly speaking, the first focuses more on the content of the essay and the second on the processes used—and these two need to be integrated throughout your essay.
- The elements we list below are not a checklist, and you should not include them mechanically, one by one. Rather, if you focus on these various objectives simultaneously, the work on one will help to develop others. Ensure that you have, somewhere in your essay, achieved most of these - as appropriate to your title - to help you to create a good overall impression in the examiner's mind as to the quality of your essay. Just as a recipe results in a single dish and not a number of piles of ingredients, your essay should read smoothly from start to finish, with each element of it playing its proper role.

Essay assessment aspect one

1. How well do you **acknowledge** and **understand knowledge questions** connected to the prescribed title?

Read the essay assessment instrument in the TOK Guide and study our advice to see how you can meet the requirements for the first aspect of assessment in your essay. Review your exploration document to ensure that you:

- are **clear** about the meaning and intent of the title, and of the main terms it contains
- **have in mind** one or more knowledge questions and are clear about their connections to the prescribed title and each other
- can **establish** a sustained focus on addressing the title through those knowledge questions, seeking to **answer** them
- will create effective **links** to appropriate areas of knowledge
- can **demonstrate** how relevant ways of knowing contribute to the AOKs and knowledge in general, with reference to the title
- will **include** references to both personal and shared knowledge
- will **investigate** different perspectives—your own and others'—towards the KQ(s)

Show in your own words your understanding of your chosen title; parroting or repeating the title does not show the reader anything. You need to show clearly the links between the title,