Myth: Every subject requires a different kind of essay.

Fact: Although there are some surface differences in approach, all IB subjects, the Extended Essay, and Theory of Knowledge demand some fundamental qualities in a good essay:

• a demonstrated understanding of the issue under discussion

• a demonstrated skill in analytical thinking in the form learned in the particular subject

• a well organized and clearly written presentation of the ideas, with control of overall argument

• honesty in not plagiarizing, and often a formalization of this principle in following accepted practice of footnotes and bibliography.

Gaining control of essay writing in any one part of your IB helps in all other parts.
SIX STEPS TO WRITING A GOOD TOK ESSAY:
A STUDENT GUIDE

STEP 1:
SELECT A TITLE FROM THE IB LIST.

Do not instantly seize upon a title that sounds appealing and plunge into it headlong. Instead, read carefully all titles (that is, all topics or questions) on the list. Which one allows you to demonstrate best your understanding of ToK issues and your own critical skills? Remember that you may not change the title to something else that you wish you had been asked, but must respond to what the IB has given.

WHAT ARE THE KEY WORDS OF CONCEPTS?

Are there key words of the Theory of Knowledge course – words such as “belief,” “knowledge,” “truth,” or “justification”? Are you clear about what they mean? Are you aware of ambiguities in meaning, or of possible alternative meanings? Check back on class notes, and give these words some thought.

How are the key concepts related to each other? Put the title into your own words to make sure you understand what is being asked.

STEP 2
READ THE INSTRUCTIONS AND THE MARKING CRITERIA.

Do not skip this step. Do not skip this step. Do not even **think** about skipping this step.

(a) Read the instructions. What are the key words of instruction?

### WHAT ARE THE KEY WORDS OF INSTRUCTION?

If you are told to “assess” or “evaluate” a claim, then you are supposed to consider the arguments both for and against it, taking into account any ambiguities in interpreting it. Possible responses, *for example*:

- that the claim is justified in these ways or up to this point, but not justified in those ways or beyond that point

- that whether or not the claim is justified depends on what is meant by one of its key words of concepts, so that if you take one version of the key word the claim is justified, but if you take a different version it is not

- that, although some justification can be offered for this point of view, the claim is really an oversimplification and misrepresentation

If you are asked “to what extent” or “in what way” a statement is justified, then you are being asked the same thing, but in different words.

If you are being asked a question directly, your
response must still take the same approach of considering to what extent or in what ways you consider the answer to be yes or no.

Notice that the instructions on making and supporting arguments are not unlike those for all other courses where essays are required.

Now look at the general instructions which apply to all the topics/titles, regardless of what the key words of instructions within them may be. These instructions tell you exactly what you are expected to do in your essay.

Remember to centre your essay on problems of knowledge and, where appropriate, refer to other parts of your IB programme and to experiences as a knower. Always justify your statements and provide relevant examples to illustrate your arguments, and remember to consider what can be said against them. If you use external sources, cite them according to a recognized convention. Examiners mark essays against the title as set. Respond to the title as given; do not alter it in any way. Your essay must be between 1200 and 1600 words in length.

Last, read over the criteria according to which your essay will be marked. Pay attention to the description of the top mark in each category in order to set your goals for an appropriate essay. Note that the first two categories (Knowledge Issues and Quality of Analysis) are emphasized in importance by being given double points.

Think of the essay as a kind of game – perhaps basketball or soccer in which you have to show your skills. Or think of it as a performance of dance or music. The audience will recognize a good game or performance and give you applause – if you do it well. You’re going for gold. So read the marking criteria, and make sure that you understand how to get your gold medal.
## MARKING CRITERIA

### A. KNOWLEDGE ISSUE(S) (10 points)
Is/are the problems of knowledge implied by the prescribed title recognized and understood, and prominently maintained throughout the essay?
The phrase “problems of knowledge” refers to possible uncertainties, biases in approach to knowledge or limitations of knowledge, and the methods of verification and justification appropriate to the different areas of knowledge.

For the top mark of 10: an excellent recognition and understanding of the problem(s) of knowledge implied by the prescribed title; the development of ideas is consistently relevant to the prescribed title in particular, and to ToK in general; it is a balanced, purposeful enquiry, and reflects the voice of the candidate.

### B. QUALITY OF ANALYSIS (10 points)
Do the analysis, and the treatment of counter-claims, show critical reflection and insight in addressing the problem(s) of knowledge?

For the top mark of 10: an excellent level of critical reflection and insight; the discussion is detailed, and arguments are logically valid; the main points are cogently justified and evaluate, and there is effective acknowledgement of their implications; counter-claims are identified and thoroughly evaluated.

### C. BREADTH AND LINKS (5 points)
Does the essay reflect an awareness of different Ways of Knowing and different Areas of Knowledge, and of how they may be linked?
The terms “Ways of Knowing” and “Areas of Knowledge” refer to the elements of the ToK diagram. This is not to discourage reference to elements which do not feature on the diagram and which may be equally relevant and appropriate.

The word “across” here denotes links and comparisons across elements in the same radial section of the diagram. The word “between” here denotes links and comparisons between elements in different radial sections of the diagram.

For the top mark of 5: an excellent level of awareness of different Ways of Knowing and different Areas of Knowledge; effective links and comparisons are drawn across and between them.

### D. STRUCTURE, CLARITY, AND LOGICAL COHERENCE (5 pts)
Is the essay structured, clear and logically coherent?
If the essay is of fewer than 1200 words or exceeds 1600 words in length, zero will be awarded for this criterion.

This criterion is not intended to assess linguistic skills. Rather, it is intended to assess the extent to which the main ideas are clearly and coherently conveyed in an appropriate structured form.

For the top mark of 5: excellently structured, with a concise introduction, and a clear, logically coherent development of the argument leading to an effective conclusion; concepts and distinctions are succinctly defined and clarified.

### E. EXAMPLES (5 points)
Is the essay well supported by appropriate examples drawn from a variety of sources?
For the top mark of 5: excellent (consistently appropriate and effective) examples, drawn from a wide variety of sources, including the candidate’s own experience, to illustrate succinctly the main points of the argument; the examples reflect a high degree of cultural diversity.

### F. FACTUAL ACCURACY AND RELIABILITY (5 points)
Are the affirmations factually accurate and, if sources were used, were they reliable and correctly cited?
Essays which require facts to support the argument, but omit to use them, will be awarded zero.

for the top mark of 5: an excellent level of factual accuracy, and sources are reliable, and are consistently and correctly cited, according to a recognized convention

STEP 3
GATHER YOUR IDEAS.

(a) Now look back to the title you have chosen and start to identify the problems of knowledge which it raises. Are you clear in your mind what a “problem of knowledge” is? If not, re-read the explanation: “The phrase ‘problems of knowledge’ refers to possible uncertainties, biases in approach to knowledge or limitations of knowledge, and the methods of verification and justification appropriate to the different areas of knowledge.” Remember that a “problem of knowledge” is not really a problem at all in the everyday sense of the word – not unless you expect knowledge to be simple and certain. (And then the problem may not be in the knowledge but in your expectations!) Do not treat an area of knowledge as somehow inferior if there are numerous difficulties which it faces in trying to gain knowledge.

What are the problems of knowledge that I can see in the title I’ve chosen? What are the issues I should discuss?
• ?
• ?
• ?

(b) Think about how the problems of knowledge raised by your title are relevant to different Areas of Knowledge and Ways of Knowing. Do all cultures see these problems in the same way? What comparisons can you draw, what general conclusions do you reach, and what arguments can be made against those conclusions? Can you find examples to illustrate your points? Note down your ideas quickly, without trying yet to structure them. Write until your mind runs dry. It will.

What Ways of Knowing and Areas of Knowledge are relevant? Which ones are the best to discuss here?
Think broadly, drawing the comparisons and links between Ways and Areas. Try drawing lines between parts of the ToK Diagram and think of connections that your title suggests. Think about the people who are doing the knowing, and about different cultural views.

(c) Now enrich your immediate ideas by going back over notes from your ToK course to remind yourself of class discussions and material which are relevant to your title. Gather examples to illustrate your points from notes and texts from your other IB courses, the newspaper, people you know, your own experience, or any other sources relevant. Remember, though, that the ToK essay is not a research paper. You will not find your response to the title in a book; books and other sources give you only the raw material which you must shape into your own response.

Give it personal thought!

(d) If time allows, you may want to live with your ideas floating in your mind for a week or so at this point, gathering more as thoughts hit you in class, your CAS activities, or elsewhere. This step of gathering ideas is often challenging – and extremely enjoyable. It is a chance to engage your own mind in considering the central ToK question: “How do I know?” If you find ideas at all interesting or like to reflect on what beliefs or knowledge your life experience and education have given you, you will probably find this stage of the essay personally stimulating. Moreover, you will be given credit in your essay for pulling together the relevant ideas in a way which reflects your own thinking and draws illustrations of ideas not only from public facts and explanations but also from your own life experience.
STEP 4
ORGANIZE YOUR IDEAS
IN PREPARATION FOR WRITING.

Now comes probably the greatest struggle of the essay – to move from scribbled notes of intertangled ideas to a plan for an essay which lays out (one, two, three!) a sequence of arguments which respond clearly to the title. If you find this step difficult, remember that no one is born (as far as I know!) already knowing how to write an essay. It takes concentration and practice to learn to swim, to tango . . . or to organize ideas for an essay. Allow yourself only a few minutes to wail “But I can’t . . .!” and then settle down to try.

As you put your ideas into related groups and shuffle them into order, you should identify your THESIS – that is, the central point which you want to make in your essay. Distil it into a single sentence to write at the top of your plan. Make sure that every subsection of your essay develops this core idea in some way, including considering counter-arguments to it. If any ideas you gathered in step 3 are not actually relevant to the title, force yourself to cut them out of your plan no matter how much you like them.

There are many possible ways of structuring ideas in an essay, depending on the topic. For example,

• you might develop three reasons for accepting a particular conclusion, then counter them with four stronger reasons for rejecting it and accepting a different one;
• you might compare two areas of knowledge by developing first what they have in common and then how they differ in the terms of the title;
• you might consider a series of possible approaches to knowing and reflect upon the problems and the strengths inherent in each in turn in the context given by the title.

*There is no formula for a perfect plan.* The only thing essential is that the sequence of ideas as you move from subsection to subsection in the body
of your essay must develop your thesis, which in turn must respond to the set title.

The Well-Organized Essay at a Glance (Thesis-First Pattern)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction: The overall goal is to make clear what your topic is and establish the central argument (thesis) of your essay. This paragraph should be short.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Its first sentence should capture the interest of the reader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Its final sentence should be your THESIS.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**THESIS**

**TOPIC SENTENCE**

Each paragraph of the body should start with a sentence introducing its main point, which the rest of the paragraph then supports with elaboration on the idea and examples where appropriate to illustrate the main points.

**transition**

**TOPIC SENTENCE**

Each paragraph of the body should start with a sentence introducing its main point, which the rest of the paragraph then supports with elaboration on the idea and examples where appropriate to illustrate the main points.

**transition**

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Each paragraph of the body should start with a sentence introducing its main point, which the rest of the paragraph then supports with elaboration on the idea and examples where appropriate to illustrate the main points.

**transition**

**TOPIC SENTENCE**

Each paragraph of the body should start with a sentence introducing its main point, which the rest of the paragraph then supports with elaboration on the idea and examples where appropriate to illustrate the main points.

**etc**

**THESIS**

Conclusion: Its overall goal is to draw your arguments together and re-state your thesis, which by now should be well established by your arguments.

• Its first sentence should be your thesis, probably stated in different words and accompanied by a transition such as “Clearly” or “In conclusion” or “Thus”

• It should end with some kind of stylistist flourish – perhaps a final reflection or a relevant quotation. Remember that the final words of this final sentence are in a very emphasized position, so should be key words.
IT SHOULD BE POSSIBLE TO FOLLOW THE ARGUMENT OF YOUR ESSAY QUICKLY SIMPLY BY READING YOUR THESIS AND TOPIC SENTENCES.

In order to decide on an overall strategy for argument it might be useful to consider the following **two major patterns of essay development.**

1. **Thesis First**

   In this pattern of development, you place your thesis in your introductory paragraph, usually as its final sentence, so that your central argument hits the reader right at the beginning. Each subsection of the body of the essay then supports and develops the thesis. The conclusion picks up the thesis again, restating it in somewhat different words as an argument which you have firmly established, and ends with a broader reflection or a stylistic flourish.

   Note that the thesis will often have the counter-argument built right into it (e.g. “Although $X$ has some justification, $Y$ is more convincing.”). You will usually treat counter arguments at the beginning, in order to lay them aside as you move on to give -- in order of climax with the most persuasive at the end -- the arguments which you think are better justified.

2. **Thesis Last**

   In this pattern of development, you raise a focused question in your introduction, placing it usually as the final sentence of the introductory paragraph. Each subsection of the body of the essay then treats aspects of the question or possible answers to it, usually in order of climax with the most persuasive at the end. The thesis then emerges firmly at the end of the essay as the conclusion of the argument. This pattern simulates the process of thinking and reaching a conclusion. Do not be fooled, though, into thinking that you really can just think and write as you go. This pattern demands just as much advance planning of as the other does.
Different school systems or writers favour one pattern or the other, but either one can be effective. If you are in doubt about which to use or unsure of your writing skills, however, the thesis-first pattern is safer in immediately getting your argument on track and giving a reader confidence in your control of ideas.

**STEP 5**

**WRITE THE ESSAY.**

By now you have done extensive thinking and planning – but you still have no essay! The actual writing, though, is only a small part of a good essay. If you have prepared well it should be straightforward. Keep the following points in mind as you write and revise your draft:

- You should keep your thesis in front of you at all times to keep your mind focused on the central argument you must sustain. Write it on a large piece of paper and tape it to the wall above your desk or above the computer screen.

- The marking criteria favour a concise introduction, one which establishes your topic and sets out your thesis, but does not go on and on and on for hundreds of words. In your first draft, you may want just to write *only your thesis* as the introduction and just get going on your argument. You can come back at the end to write a nice-sounding opening.
Try to develop ideas in proportion to their importance in your overall plan. Your essay must be between 1200 and 1600 words in length, so control the degree to which you expand on an idea as you go. Doing so is not easy, but it is easier than trying to readjust a whole essay at the end.

You are expected to clarify concepts as you go, defining terms if necessary.

- Do not, however, pad out your essay with definitions of terms which are not particularly ambiguous.
- Do not drop into your essay lumps of definition which are not clearly linked your argument and are ignored thereafter.
- Do not, above all, use a dictionary definition to bypass complexities: no teacher or examiner will be impressed if, after a course in which you discuss possible understandings of “truth” or “knowledge,” you “solve” this problem of knowledge by plunking down a citation from the dictionary as if you have thereby settled the matter!

Select your examples from a wide variety of sources and cultures. Make sure, moreover, that they really do illustrate the points you are making. A reference to the Copernican Revolution and Galileo, for example, might illustrate a change in beliefs, but it does not demonstrate an understanding of revolutions in thinking within science; what came before was not “science” according to contemporary definition.

Avoid examples which are used so often in ToK essays around the world that the examiner will yawn.

- Don’t use Galileo at all unless he is unusually relevant. Don’t use the sun being placed in the middle of the galaxy or the earth no longer being considered flat; doing so just provokes the suspicion that you know nothing at all about the last 400 years in science and that you have made no connection at all with your IB science or anything in contemporary media. If you really don’t know what is happening in current science, look at the section on Science and Technology in the Economist (concise explanations for a non-scientific but educated audience) or check Scientific American, or any similar publication. And then consider starting to read the daily newspaper so that you don’t go through life ignorant!

- Don’t use Inuit words for snow as your example to illustrate anything about language – unless you speak the language yourself. Almost every IB student in the world uses this example, usually badly. With all the languages spoken in the world, and all the variety of vocabulary, expressions and structures, can’t you come up with something else?
You are welcome to use “I” in a ToK essay. If you are speaking about your own experiences or beliefs you probably will want to do so.

Check your facts. Are your assertions accurate? Can you identify your sources? If you have quoted a source or taken significant information from it, acknowledge it following conventions for footnotes and bibliography.

Polish the essay as you finish writing. Check for sentence errors, which could interfere with the clarity of language and argument.

Finally, go back over your essay with the general directions and marking criteria in your hand, re-reading them, to make any last improvements.

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**USING PERSONAL EXAMPLES IN TOK ESSAYS: HOW SOME OTHER STUDENTS HAVE DONE IT.**

It makes me feel uncomfortable to refer to the machine that I use every day in Hong Kong as "lift", because that means I can use it only for going up to but not going down from my home on the thirty-fourth floor. I prefer the Chinese translation -- "up-and-down-machine."

Jacob Sin Chun Man (Hong Kong)

Maori believe that when Tane-mahuta created living organisms, it was man that was born last, and the first man was actually a woman. Because of this we see that all other living organisms (fish, plants, lions, eagles, slugs, etc.) are the older siblings, making man inferior to them all, including woman. So when Maori speak of these, our older brothers and sisters, we speak in very respectful tones, using forms of the words that imply greatness and prestige, thereby showing our elders the respect that they deserve. Through this we also see that it is impossible for a Maori to be insulted by being called an animal, no matter how vile the animal may seem to anyone else. So the Maori who has been called a dog by someone else considers him/herself complimented.

Maika Te Amo (New Zealand)

Different languages create somewhat different perceptions of reality. For instance, in the philosophy lessons some time ago it was difficult for me to understand the thought of Mary Daly, a contemporary American feminist philosopher, when she protested against the sexist world perception, saying that the reason for it is the Christian image of God as a male. My difficulty was that in my mother tongue Estonian, there is no difference between "she" or "he". The common third person singular pronoun is simply "tema" or the abbreviated version "ta." Neither are nouns divided into feminine, masculine or neutral, as occurs in many Indo-European languages. I, as a native speaker, can say that although it may sound confusing, I have never had troubles with this "gap" and, in fact, am quite proud of this aspect of "sexlessness" in Estonian.

Triin Tammeveski (Estonia)
STEP 6
HAND IT IN – AND CELEBRATE!

A good Theory of Knowledge essay does demand that you think deeply about questions of truth which thread themselves through all areas of your life. If you have done your personal best to take a significant question of knowledge and make it your own, you have achieved a goal central to your International Baccalaureate – and potentially important in the growth of your own thinking. Congratulations! Whatever the mark on the essay may end up being, you have reason for celebration.