



## 4. The TOK essay

*"Once I got used to theory of knowledge, I enjoyed writing the essays because I found that they were an opportunity for me to think for myself about the way I was building up my knowledge and values. Writing a TOK essay was my 'me space' for reflecting on a very wonderful but confusing world of knowledge and issues around me and to decide what is and what is not most important. My final essay was a chance to calmly evaluate some of the knowledge I'd discovered on my diploma!" (Isobel)*

### Unpacking a strange bag

We have described the TOK course as a voyage over the sea of knowledge. Now, we will liken the two TOK assessment tasks to two different types of bags for the voyage. The essay title can be understood to be a bag of things provided to you. Each title, then, is like a bag provided for your convenience by a shipping company. This bag will contain somebody else's idea of essential articles for your voyage, such as toiletries, soap or shampoo. Your job is to unpack the bag, identify its contents, and then build a display (your essay) that explains how the bag's contents can be understood in terms of, and applied to a part of, the knowledge sea. The TOK prescribed titles are a collection of 10 bags from which you must try to choose the one that is best for you. A bag provided by a stranger might at first seem strange but, on opening it, you will soon find items that are familiar to you, like those in the bag described above.



Figure 4

## The essay process

You might be tempted to grab the first likely looking title and start writing, but we suggest that you approach the task in five stages:

**Unpack** the 10 titles → **Choose** your title → **Brainstorm** the elements to include → **Plan** out the essay → **Write** the essay

We will concentrate mostly on the first three of these stages for two reasons. First, we believe that, if you unpack the titles carefully, choose the one that suits you best and brainstorm what to include well, then you are very likely to do a good job of the planning and writing. Second, we can offer general procedures for these first three, but how to plan and write your essay will depend quite a lot on the details of your unpacking and brainstorming.

## Unpacking the titles

Before choosing your TOK essay title bag, you will need to know what each of them contains. The 10 titles offered cover a range of focuses and styles, each indicating different knowledge issues 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 “bag” and look more carefully that you come across very familiar TOK contents such as the AOKs, the WOKs, the attributes of knowers, or key TOK concepts such as certainty, reliability, truth, validity, context or culture. It makes sense to take a careful look through the 10 title “bags” and pick the one that suits you and your understanding of TOK best. Don’t choose a bag whose contents are unfamiliar to you!

## Know what can be found in titles

To begin unpacking a title, you need to open the bag and turn out the items that you find inside. You then need to identify which items are essential ones. Just as any bag would have features that allow us to identify it as a bag, all TOK essay titles share basic features with other titles. They all:

- arise from the TOK course
- contain references to key TOK elements (AOKs, WOKs, and/or TOK-related terms)
- contain action terms (words that indicate to you what your task is)
- point to or state knowledge issues
- 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 with which you may not agree.

Unpacking the title means examining, clarifying and exploring all these central items in each particular title. Later in this chapter, as exemplars, we take you through a process of unpacking the essential features and requirements of five essay titles from the November 2007–May 2008 prescribed title list. We will also illustrate the brainstorming phase, and provide you with actual essays and essay extracts (written by previous students), accompanied by commentaries to show how marks were gained and lost.

Many of our unpacking suggestions can be applied to any TOK essay title, whereas others are more pertinent to certain titles. Therefore, we also take you through the more individualized aspects of each essay title type. You can then apply our guidelines to unpacking, choosing, brainstorming, planning and writing your own essay. As not all bags are identical, neither are all TOK essay titles. We will identify several different common essay types in the next section. Knowing which essay type you have chosen will help you apply these guidelines to your particular essay title.

## Essay types

Many essays will fall into one of four different types with somewhat different emphases. Recognizing the type may assist you to unpack, address and answer the prescribed title. Below we give you examples of the four types from previous prescribed title lists.

1. Titles that focus on a TOK-related term (or two), asking for evaluation across AOKs and/or WOKs.

“When mathematicians, historians and scientists say that they have explained something, are they using the word ‘explain’ in the same way?” (Title 1, 2006–7)

TOK-related term: explain. AOKs: mathematics, history, natural science.

2. Titles that focus on an area of knowledge (or maybe two) and require comparison or contrast between AOKs or across WOKs, generally looking at a TOK-related term (or two).

“It is often claimed that scientific results must be replicable.

the essential items? How can they be best displayed? What other items will you need to add to the collection, and where? Good planning will ensure that your new bag is well designed in order to hold, carry and display the items effectively.

Although we have offered you some general rules for unpacking, brainstorming and planning a designer essay in response to the prescribed title you chose, it is up to you to fill in the details of the design, drawing on your own experiences, interests, general knowledge and IB studies. Having a good design for your essay—an essay plan—is essential if you want a bag that is as strong and useful as it is eye-catching!

### Be prepared

- Before writing your essay, develop notes, a diagram or something similar, in which your plan for organizing your ideas is clearly laid out.
- Make sure the main ideas, including your knowledge issue and line of argument, are obvious.
- Show your plan to others—at the very least, to your teacher.

## Writing to the assessment criteria

*“In my final year, my teacher went through the criteria with us and I made sure that I had a copy by me whilst I wrote my essay. It was like using a recipe!” (Inés)*

### Constructing a useful bag

Since all TOK essays are marked according to the essay assessment criteria, these criteria should be your constant companions. If you are familiar with the TOK essay assessment criteria, you will be more focused and organized in planning and developing your essay. They should give you a clear idea of the essential considerations to have in mind. If your essay is a bag, the criteria are the general guidelines that apply to all well-constructed bags.

We have previously claimed that TOK is like a voyage on a sea of knowledge complexities and controversies. As you journeyed on the TOK voyage through knowledge issues, you have discovered and collected many ideas, insights and messages, and kept them as notes, journal entries, memos, reflections, text extracts or other items. These are a rich collection of your ideas and examples. You now need to locate and access the relevant records in order to construct your essay.

To guide yourself in constructing your bag, study the essay assessment criteria. They can help you to select and organize the complex collection of issues and ideas that you want to address

in your TOK essay. You can think of the criteria as rules for bag making that you can follow to guide the way you assemble the bag. A craftsman would examine each rule carefully. Like that artisan, regard the TOK criteria as vital guidelines to study and evaluate carefully in order to be very clear about their focus. Remember, the external examiner will use them to mark your TOK essay. We recommend that you make your own summary, to have on hand as you write. If used wisely, the criteria will lead firmly to the final goal—your completed TOK essay!

## The essay assessment criteria

**Criterion A** assesses to what extent your essay shows that you **understand** the **knowledge issue** or knowledge issues directly related to the essay title.

- When you unpack the title, you should **identify** the knowledge issue(s) related to the essay title. Sometimes, the essay title makes the KIs very clear: for example “Are reason and emotion equally necessary in justifying moral decisions?” At other times, the central KIs are **less explicit**: for example “Evaluate the role of intuition in different areas of knowledge.” This title is more open to interpretation and there are several KIs, including:
  - What is the nature and status of intuition in the creation of knowledge?
  - Does intuition have a role to play in [several named AOKs]?
  - If intuition enables knowledge to be gained within AOKs, is it in fact another WOK?

Either way, **state** the KI you will be addressing explicitly.

- Show your **understanding** of the KI raised by the title through your own expression and perspectives. However, be careful to **address** explicitly the KIs raised by the question. If you do not, your essay will be of a lower standard.
- Of course you can address several KIs, but the order and manner in which you do so will depend upon the **approach** and **perspectives** taken by you, the knower.
- **Use your introduction** to lay out clearly what you take the KIs to be, in your own words: parroting or repeating the title does not show the reader anything. If you are going to focus on a KI raised by the title, but not explicitly stated by it, you need to show the connection between your essay and the title.
- Show both **depth** and **breadth** in your treatment of the KIs, by discussing the nature of knowers, the WOKs and the AOKs and so on—but only to the extent that you can show they

are relevant to the title. “Name-checking”, or just making sure that TOK terms get mentioned, is not enough. For example, for some titles it might be appropriate to mention all the WOKs, but for others this might not. **Unpacking** the title well and **planning** carefully will have told you which WOKs you will address, and how you will show that they are relevant.

- To **demonstrate depth**, carefully and systematically **explore** and **analyse** one (or usually more) of the WOKs or AOKs. Show how KIs related to this/these WOKs/AOKs are connected to the title. For example, you might show how natural sciences come up with the conclusion that a table is mostly empty space, or what the essential features of language are, as you are going to use the term.
- **Display** your breadth of understanding by **comparing** and **contrasting** two (or more) WOKs or AOKs in one or more respects, taking note of the particular focus of the title. In that respect, explain how the two are **different** or **similar**. For example, you might discuss how investigative work in science and many valuable works of art both follow and confirm well-established conventional methodologies. However, ground-breaking work is different: radical new art such as some graffiti or conceptual art and revolutionary scientific theories such as quantum theory break conventions. They show how certain concepts or ideas can be understood better by taking a different approach or by making a paradigm shift.
- Overall, you will address criterion A best if you write an essay with well thought out and systematically presented detail. **Do what you do well**, aiming at depth rather than trying to cover too many WOKs and AOKs.

**Criterion B** is all about your **knower’s perspective**, which is, as we have seen, central to your whole understanding of TOK and certainly important in your essay. For this criterion, you have several main, interrelated, tasks. You need to show that you can:

- **think for yourself** about the title’s concerns (rather than just copying what others—your teacher, your TOK text, a book you read—may say)
- **link** your own life and experience as a learner to the knowledge issues that you have identified
- **be aware** of how your own viewpoint has been shaped by your own features (such as gender, social setting or type of education)
- **consider** how there may be multiple perspectives and how the issue might be approached differently (for example, by a person from a different culture, philosophical tradition or generation)

- **support** the claims and points that you make by picking out specific authentic examples, often from your own experience either in everyday life or in the areas that you have studied, or from media such as movies, TV, music or leisure pursuits (rather than examples others have used before you). **Check** that each example does make your point clearer

- **convince** your reader that this is your essay, and only you could have written it. Does this mean that you should use the first person (“I think”)? Despite the common advice you may hear that “I” should never be used in an essay, writing in the first person can be an effective way to show that the knower’s perspective in question is yours, and hence it is fine to use “I” judiciously: that is, reflecting upon your experiences critically, and balancing your perspective with consideration of different perspectives. Note, however, that using the first person is neither necessary nor sufficient for meeting this criterion.

- So, **beware** of the dangers of saying “I think”: you may forget that your opinion always needs to be supported with reasons and explanations, or that you must consider what others think as well.

**Criterion C** looks at the quality of your analysis of knowledge issues. Analysis goes beyond merely stating or describing the KIs. You need to explore them with a high degree of depth, detail and insight. Here are some things to check.

- Whenever you make a **major claim**, you have given the reader reasons to agree with you.
- Your **arguments** should “hang together”, so that, if you claim that a conclusion follows from what you have just written, it really does.
- You have **presented** and **developed** at least some counterclaims—alternative views that count against what you have been arguing. Be careful here to make it clear to the reader whose “voice” is speaking: for example, “an opponent of this view might say ...”. Remember also that the point of considering counterclaims is to improve your analysis. Try to deal with them, rather than just saying that there are several views.
- Your **essay flows** well: the reader knows where you are going next and why. You signpost these transitions using words and phrases such as “furthermore”, “on the other hand”, “In history, however, ...”.
- Where appropriate, you have told the reader what follows if you are right (the **implications** of your argument) and what underlying claims have been taken for granted by you or others (the **assumptions** on which views are based).

**Criterion D** assesses the **organization of ideas** in your essay. Here is where working out the “design of your bag” is vital. Before you start writing you should have a detailed plan. 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. At the planning stage, before writing out the essay in full, and again once it is completed, you should check that:

- you have **organized** the ideas you generated in your brainstorm
- your plan/essay **addresses**, in a focused manner, the title you have chosen
- the plan/essay as a whole remains **connected and relevant**, so that the reader can easily follow your overall argument
- you have **explanations** of the key terms you identified when you unpacked the title, and that you use them in a consistent way
- you have an adequate **introduction** (which can give a brief survey of the main line of argument followed by the steps in your plan) and **conclusion** (which should refer back to the introduction and the title)
- you have gathered, and checked the accuracy of, any **facts** and ideas that you need, and kept full records of their sources, to **reference** them properly.

## Now write!

When you are happy with your plan (and you have shown the plan to your teacher, and to anyone else whose judgment you trust for advice), it is time to write the essay. Expand your plan into sentences and paragraphs, then reread and edit your essay to ensure that your writing is clear, and neither ambiguous nor merely descriptive. It's a good idea to ask someone you know, whose grasp of good writing you trust, to read the essay, and highlight for you any places where they had difficulty understanding what you were trying to say. Then work on these bits until they are clearer. This is especially important if you are not writing in your native language. You will not be penalized for linguistic errors provided your meaning is clear, so make sure it is. Check again that the flow of argument is clear, and that you have not confused it with any extras you have added in at this stage.

Make sure that you have correctly **referenced all factual claims** (unless they are common knowledge) and ideas you got from someone else (it is, of course, possible to have written an essay that does not need referencing). If your school uses a TOK textbook that you have referred to at any point at all

during your course, you should reference the textbook as a source. Equally, you should reference any other books, magazine articles, websites and web forums that you may have visited, if they have influenced your ideas in any way. Use a standard method of referencing (it doesn't matter which, as long as you are consistent). The bottom line here is that your reader should have enough information to find your sources.

An example of referencing a book or article:

Dombrowski, E, Rotenberg, L, & Bick, M, (2007) *Theory of Knowledge Course Companion*, Oxford: OUP, pp 23–4.

An example of referencing a website:

Garvey, J, (2009), 'The Credit Crunch makes you stupid', <http://blog.talkingphilosophy.com/?p=767>, [posted 3 March 2009, accessed 11 March 2009].

## Unpacking kits and exemplar essays with commentaries

In the section to follow, we take a close look at five exemplar titles. First, to help you understand our advice better, we provide unpacking kits: examples of how to unpack and brainstorm for each title. Studying these will take you through all the steps we have recommended you take to help you remain focused upon the essay title you choose. We emphasize that these unpacking kits are just examples. Under each heading, we raise many issues and pose many questions. A good answer would not be able to—or need to—cover all of these in sufficient depth, but would concentrate on some of them. Equally, a good essay may also address other knowledge issues and use other supporting material that we have not mentioned here. Each heading, however, covers an important element of constructing a solid essay: we advise that you use them to respond in your own way, based on your knowledge and experience.

The unpacking kits show you how to identify and start to address some relevant knowledge issues in a suitably critical manner, using a range of the essay types we identified above. However, they do not show you how to take the material identified in the unpacking and brainstorming stages, and turn it into a plan, much less a full essay. In particular, we warn you against using the unpacking kit pattern as a template for the essay: all it will do is provide an unsorted pile of useful ideas. You will need to organize them into a coherent plan.

Second, the unpacking kit for each title is followed by three complete essays, representing a spread across the mark range. Each is accompanied by three sorts of examiner comments. ☞ comments explain what features of this essay met the demands of the specified criterion and hence contributed to the award of

a higher achievement level, comments explain what features of this essay contributed to the award of a lower achievement level, and further comments in blue boxes offer more general advice to you about what you can do to show your examiner that you are meeting the requirements of the criteria. For certain titles we have also added extracts, with comments, from essays that offer a different approach to the title.

Finally, in “Appendix 1”, we provide an essay-unpacking/brainstorming form based on the unpacking kits, in case you

would like to use it to help you choose an actual prescribed title, and start to plan your response. Using the table is not the only way to unpack and brainstorm, of course. You may choose to do it on a computer, or blank paper. Moreover, as we have said, this form will not write your essay for you. The contents of your essay should be based upon your own ideas, studies, examples, experience and observations, and following the form will help you gather that material. Planning and writing the essay, however, is up to you. We wish you well!

After reading through the kits, try to use our advice to come up with ideas of your own, for example how would you unpack a title?

### Kit 1

Evaluate the role of intuition in different areas of knowledge.

[Title 1, from November 2007/May 2008]

#### Essay type:

A type 1 title that focuses on a TOK-related term (intuition), asking for evaluation across AOKs (your choice).

#### Identify key words and phrases:

- Evaluate, role, intuition, areas of knowledge

#### Contestable concept:

- Intuition

What do you understand by intuition?

Is it a feeling, an instinct, an emotion, a kind of unconscious perception, a paranormal process like telepathy or something else?

#### Ambiguous words:

- Role

Is the title implying that intuition plays the same sort of role in all AOKs? Or should you understand the question to be asking about the differing roles of intuition?

#### Action term:

- Evaluate

You are being asked to make suggestions about the role (or roles) intuition has in different AOKs and to weigh up the adequacy of these suggestions. For example, is intuition essential in some AOKs, important in others, but of little relevance in some?

#### Assumptions in the title:

- That intuition **has a role** to play in areas of knowledge

Are you going to question whether intuition has any role to play at all or are you going to accept that it does?

If intuition does have a role in an AOK, what is the nature and the extent of this role?

- (Possibly) that there is only one type of intuition

Does the nature of intuition change in different AOKs?



### Rephrase the title to check your understanding

Having thought about all the above, now is the time for you to make sure you understand the intent of the whole title. One way to do this is to try to put it in your own words. Here is one possibility.

Come to a considered and supported opinion about how people may use intuition to gain knowledge in different professions and pursuits that belong to different AOKs

This is just one way the question could be rewritten. It focuses upon the people who may use intuition, how they use it, why and the activities in which intuition may have a role for them. Your unpacking of the terms may be different from this.

### Identify the knowledge issues:

The title very clearly raises the KI "What is the role of intuition in different AOKs?". However, to address this question you are very likely to encounter others, such as the following:

- What exactly is the nature of intuition?
- Are there different types or kinds of intuition?
- Does intuition enable knowledge to be gained with a degree of certainty?
- Can intuition clarify the nature of human experience and the role of subjectivity in the knowledge process?
- What is the relationship between intuition and other WOKs?

## Brainstorming

### Consider AOKs and WOKs

The title mentions AOKs. Does intuition have a role to play in all AOKs or only in particular AOKs? Which AOKs will you concentrate on?

What is the relationship between intuition and other WOKs?

Is intuition a WOK in its own right or is it an aspect of one of the four main WOKs?

What does the way we use language when referring to intuition reveal about the nature of intuition?

### Make claims and develop perspectives using authentic examples to illustrate and support your discussion:

**Provide** your own **examples** of intuition at work in different AOKs.

Intuition is clearly related to how we know things and the title asks you to consider AOKs.

Try to find examples based upon your own experience or that of others. One way to compare different AOKs is by considering professions that look at similar occurrences through different AOKs—a firefighter with a combustion chemist, or a horse trainer with an artist who paints horses.

Can you give a conclusive definition of intuition or does intuition need to be identified differently in each AOK?

### Analyse and argue

**Provide** effective **counterclaims**, **counter-arguments** and **counter-examples** to support them.

You may wish to provide an example of a situation where it could be claimed that intuition is a WOK used by a firefighter or a horse trainer. However, you may later wish to question this with a counterclaim that the firefighter or horse trainer is using inductive reasoning or sense perception-based knowing rather than intuition.

A counterclaim can open the way for in-depth analysis; thus you could follow your counter-argument with analysis of the possible relationship between intuition and inductive reasoning and/or knowing based on experience by means of sense perception. Does consideration of this relationship reveal differences or similarities between the arts and the sciences?

### Evaluate and conclude

Does intuition have a role to play in every AOK?

Are there different types of intuition, some more relevant to certain AOKs than others?

Are some kinds of intuition more certain and reliable than others?

What is the significance of intuition to the human knowledge process?

is relevant and coherent, it can be seen as truthful. Absoluteness is not a reasonable requirement. After all, as there is no absolute definition of truth, perhaps it is not unreasonable that truth itself is contextual.

You should be able to:

- understand what can help you unpack your selected title; the following flowchart is one way in which this can be done.

