

# Advice on Writing Your Theory of Knowledge Essay

## 1. Remember the Aim of the Theory of Knowledge Course:

*Think critically* – question everything. The course revolves around two fundamental questions:

- i. What is it I claim to know?
- ii. How valid are the methods used to establish what it is I claim to know?

In your essay you must investigate, discuss and critically examine – that means to challenge and show the limitations as well as also showing the successes – the *methods* used to try and explain “How do we know that we know what we know?”

You must discuss the role of the Ways of Knowing, their strengths and limitations in the processes and methods used by the different Areas of Knowledge. You must highlight all of the “controversies” (the Problems of Knowledge and Knowledge Issues), where assumptions and claims are made but whose basis is still questionable, or where something works in one Area of Knowledge but not in another.

## 2. Read the Assessment Criteria:

You'll find this in the Theory of Knowledge Guide online / in-classroom.

## 3. Choose an Essay Title:

Pick an Essay Title that “speaks” to you. Choose one that you are able to break down and rewrite into your own words. Highlight all of the implicit *assumptions* it says about knowledge and the “truth,” and then identify the limitations and successes of the Ways of Knowing in different Areas of Knowledge.

For example, the following title is taken from May 2005:

"For some people science is the supreme form of all knowledge. Is this view reasonable or does it involve a misunderstanding of science or of knowledge?"

- i. Which people? People in the street or academics?
- ii. What is meant by 'knowledge'? Is it useful information which is practical? Is knowledge being able to understand something? How can you get knowledge which is 'supreme' over other types of knowledge?
- iii. What do they mean by 'science'? Natural Science or Social Sciences?  
**International example** – Tibetan Buddhism considers itself to be a 'science'? So does 'parapsychology' – what makes 'science' a science?
- iv. To define science – I'd need to explain the 'scientific method' – **Knowledge issues** – show examples of its successes;

- v. Now I need to explain the **knowledge problems** in the title – the 'controversial assumptions' and 'misunderstandings'. I need to use **counter-examples** – look at other Areas of Knowledge to see whether it is 'supreme'. For example, the Natural Sciences could tell me how Hitler died – but I'd need History to explain why he was in a bunker in a bombed out Berlin; Natural Science could tell me how to perform euthanasia or an abortion – but I need Ethics to tell whether I should or not.
- vi. Could also bring in a Way of Knowing – emotion – link it to faith and use examples of where people trust their intuition/gut feelings over accepted knowledge. Need to assess what is meant by "reasonable" in the Title.

#### 4. **Write an Essay Plan:**

Think of writing your essay like cooking a meal. To get the best result you need to gather the right ingredients, prepare and put them into the pot at different times and exclude everything else that needn't be there. It is exactly the same with your essay – you only have 1600 words max – so you need to be precise, relevant, clear and efficient.

- i. Identify what the implicit assumptions are in the Title – and highlight which Ways of Knowing and Areas of Knowledge are directly involved. Rewrite the Title and put it into your own words.
- ii. Identify all of the Problems of Knowledge and Knowledge Issues raised by these assumptions, that is highlight the successes and limitations of different ways of Ways of Knowing in the Areas of Knowledge that the title relates to. Remember, not all of the Ways of Knowing will be relevant. Remember to explain how these problems affect our attainment of knowledge.
- iii. Identify examples from your other IB subjects, TOK Journal and lectures, CAS Programme, Focus Weeks, books, Newspapers, Internet Sites, Films, Music, friends and family, which support or challenge the assumptions made in the Title. **Discuss** your ideas with friends and family to help you get examples – but always acknowledge their support. Remember the Examiners are looking for:
  - a. **Counter-examples** – clear illustrations of where the methods used to support the assumptions of the Title may work in one Area of Knowledge but completely collapse, or are not relevant in another. The counter-example may be in an Area of Knowledge which is not mentioned in the Title – so you need to bring it in!
  - b. **Cross-cultural examples** – try and find examples which support the assumptions made in the Title, or challenge them and so become your counter-examples, from as International a background as is possible. The results of an experiment, a historical event, a word or action, may all be interpreted differently by different ethnic cultures, religions and socio-economic political societies.
  - c. **Personal examples** – include examples that are from your own learning experience – if you've read a book, heard a song, seen a film, have a friend or relative whose views challenge the assumptions of the Title – then quote and reference them.

- iv. **Do not include quotes from Dictionaries unless you are going to critically examine and challenge what they are saying. You can say that following critical analysis the point of view is valid in this Area of Knowledge and under these circumstances but falls down or is irrelevant in this Area of Knowledge or under these circumstances. Please *do not* quote someone as if it is the whole 'truth'. Remember, it is only an opinion. Please *do not* spend the entire essay repeating somebody else's ideas which you do not challenge. Be critical.**

## 5. Structuring Your Essay:

Your essay will fall into three parts:

- i. **Introduction** – feel free to rewrite the Title highlighting all of the Problems of Knowledge and Knowledge Issues, stating which Ways of Knowing and Areas of Knowledge are going to be discussed. Basically, – **tell me what you are going to 'tell me'** – what examples, counter-examples and other Areas of Knowledge are going to be looked at. **Remember** to always explain how the problems which have been identified affect our attainment of knowledge (the core aim of the Theory of Knowledge course).
- ii. **Body of the essay** – now it is time to **'tell me'** what it is you want to say. Here you need a balanced critical examination and evaluation – supportive examples versus counter-examples – both international and personal – all showing the role of the Ways of Knowing in different Areas of Knowledge. **Remember** to always explain how the problems discussed enhance, or limit, our attainment of knowledge.
- iii. **Conclusion** – remember you only have 1600 max words – so briefly 'tell me what you told me' but only focus on the real Problems of Knowledge. Try to end your essay being forward looking – developing new technology may resolve the issue, or speaking the same language – or it may be a problem that you feel we will never overcome. Either way, explain how the problems which have been identified affect our attainment of knowledge.

## 6. Bibliography and Referencing

Read the past example essays, as well as the examples provided in the Theory of Knowledge Essay Checklist, and please conform to the MLA style. **Proof-Reading Your essay:**

Give your essay to a friend, especially one who is a native English speaker, to read over for positive criticism. You want the examiner to understand what it is you are trying to say, that your examples are relevant and that your points are expressed clearly. It will save a considerably amount of time for your teachers, and yourself, if you have ironed out any problems before giving it to your teacher to read over. Remember – the IBO states that we can only read and comment on a candidates essay only once.

## 7. Remember the Things to Avoid:

- i. Do not quote from dictionaries – unless you are going to critically examine what it says;
- ii. Do not write a dry research report just reproducing other people's arguments and ideas – the examiners will know what Plato and Descartes said – so critically examine everything and provide your own views;
- iii. Do not write an essay based purely on your own reflections and assumptions drawn from personal experience – you do need to show critical analysis – and so you will have to do research and show evidence of where your reflections have come from.

## 8. **Research**

Remember to:

- i. Use your TOK Online Journal for ideas – and if referring to a class mates presentation – always state their full name, nationality, title of the presentation and the date that it was presented on;
- ii. Use books and Newspapers – and keep a record of all the publication details and the pages that you taken quotes and points from;
- iii. Use the Internet – and always copy and paste the web address over into word and state the date that you accessed it – this will help you a lot when you write your bibliography;
- iv. Be creative – feel free to include a picture, or scan a piece of music, or include lyrics to a song or include a mathematical proof in the appendix of your essay – if you feel it will help support an argument in your essay, then use it!

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