

Tim Woods's Advices for TOK Essay

All the following articles have been taken directly from Tim Woods's website *timwoods.org* and put together to form a one document. This was done in order to make it easier for TOK students to follow Tim Woods's marvellous instructions.

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How To Structure A Theory of Knowledge Essay¹

The following structure is a foolproof, step-by-step method you can use on any ToK essay to get very high marks.

It really works.

Before you can begin your real/final essay, you'll need to take the title (something like: "What is it about mathematics that makes it convincing?") and come up with a Knowledge Question (KQ) that turns the title into a question of knowledge. For example, "To what extent is math more reliable than other areas of knowledge?").

In my ToK Mastery Course I encourage you to begin the KQ with words like: "*To what extent...*", "*How do we know that...*" "*How reliable is...*", "*How certain is...*" These kind of open questions allow you to pull in multiple perspectives (AoK's and WoK's, as we'll talk about), so you can show your TOK thinking. Also, make sure that your question is directly related to knowing – that it is a question about knowledge (not about Sociology, for example).

Second, take your KQ and choose three aspects of knowledge you're going to relate it to: any of the Areas of Knowledge (Mathematics, Human sciences, Natural sciences, the Arts, Ethics, and History) or the Ways of Knowing (Sense perception, Reason, Emotion, Language). Then you can explore these in your essay.

¹ <http://www.timwoods.org/2011/11/13/how-to-structure-a-theory-of-knowledge-essay/>
Accessed on 9th of September 2015

The Body

Each body section will look at another area of knowledge or way of knowing. To explore the KQ we came up with above, let's use Mathematics, Natural Science and Ethics as our three aspects. Each of these parts can be thought of as arguments you're making.

Think of a court case. Your lawyer will make the case that you can't be guilty of robbing the bank (her thesis), by using several arguments (claims); she'll show that A-you weren't there, B-you're a moral person and C-you don't have the technical knowledge to pull off a job like that. However, if your lawyer was a ToK student they would also be explaining 3 reasons why you might be guilty (the counterclaims). A-someone said they saw you there, B-you did lie to your mom about candy one time and C-you are pretty good at computers. The lawyers would use evidence to support each of these claims and counterclaims.

Making sure your evidence actually supports your claim is one of the toughest aspects of the essay.

The Formula

The formula has 5 sections and 9 paragraphs overall and specific aspects need to go in each.

Section 1: The Introduction 150-200 words

Paragraph 1

- **Give your KQ.** For example, "To what extent is math more reliable than other areas of knowledge?"

- **State your thesis.** What is your short answer to the KQ (your question of knowledge). “While looking at mathematics, natural science and ethics, we will see that mathematics isn’t necessarily more reliable; however, we will see that knowledge is different in different fields.”
- **Give us a roadmap,** a sentence that gives us a preview, showing us what you’re going to do in your body paragraphs. Make it clear how you are going to explore the KQ, which Ways of Know-ing and/or Areas of Knowl-edge you’re going to use. This will make it easy for the marker to know what to look for. An example: “Mathematics can be seen as more reliable because it uses reason. Natural science can be less reliable because it relies on observation. And ethics can be less reliable because it is related to the norms of a person’s society.”

Section 2: Two paragraphs totalling 400 words

Paragraph 2

- **Claim.** A claim a topic sentence that outlines your argument about the KQ. For example you could claim that, “Mathematics can be relied on because it is a purely logical system.”
- **Explain.** Elaborate and clarify your claim. “Mathematics is axiomatic and independent of subjective experience.”
- **Example.** A real life example, to clarify and support the claim from your own experience. Examples should be personal, specific, precise and real. Did something happen in your Science class? Did you have a conversation with your or hear a story from your grandfather? These are evidence from your own life rather than examples from Darwin or Lincoln. So you could talk about how, “In mathematics we learned that the inside angles of a triangle, in Euclidian space, sum up to 180 degrees.”

Paragraph 3

- **Counter-claim.** Argue against your claim above. “However, it is possible to come to different conclusions using different systems of mathematics.”
- **Example.** An example that supports your counter claim. “There are different It is not possible to demonstrate that the interior angles of a triangle equal 180 degrees in Euclidian space, this cannot be proven within other systems, such as spherical geometry or hyperbolic geometry.”
- **Link to KQ.** Quickly sum up the (complicated) insights of this section. “It is therefore clear that mathematics is reliable to an extent, but often it can only show something to be true within one fixed system or approach.”

Section 3: Another two body paragraphs, looking at your second AoK or WoK.

Write these using the same approach you saw in paragraphs 2 and 3. 400 words

Paragraph 4

- **Claim.**
- **Explain.**
- **Example.**

Paragraph 5

- **Counter-claim.**
- **Example.**
- **Link to KQ.**

Section 4: Another two body paragraphs, looking at your third AoK or WoK.

Write these using the same approach you saw in paragraphs 2 and 3. 400 words

Paragraph 6

- **Claim.**
- **Explain.**
- **Example.**

Paragraph 7

- **Counter-claim.**
- **Example.**
- **Link to KQ.**

Section 5: Conclusion with two paragraphs totalling 200-250 words

Paragraph 8

- **Implications and significance.** Why is it important that we know about this?
- **Perspective.** Explain another view that someone may have (i.e. an older person, someone who's had different life experiences than you)

Paragraph 9

- Sum up the argument. The thesis again, in short.

How To Make A Good Theory of Knowledge Essay Great²

The purpose of this article is to help you strengthen the logic and argument of your ToK essay. This is great for making final touches to your work and to help you spot some common mistakes. And it will, of course, pull your mark up.

I'm just going to assume that you're already using my Essay structure. (It's a 9 paragraph, 3 section structure which works with just about every question). It will make a lot more sense if you are.

Getting Started

When you first get assigned your real ToK essay, you'll have a few "titles" to choose from. You choose a title, and then you have to come up with a KQ for it and then a thesis. The thesis is your brief answer to your KQ (or your hypothesis).

The Approach

In general your essay is about claims (with examples), counterclaims (with examples) and conclusions. It's important that you understand that your claims always support your thesis and your counterclaims always oppose your thesis.

I have my students think in terms of Claim => Counterclaim => Mini-conclusion. Outside of ToK land we refer to this as Thesis (claim) => Antithesis (counterclaim) => Synthesis (mini-conclusion).

² <http://www.timwoods.org/2012/11/18/how-to-make-a-good-theory-of-knowledge-essay-great/> Accessed on 9th of September 2015

Your mini-conclusion is a simple statement that combines the insights of your claim and counterclaim. (I.e. “Looking at the role of imagination in art, we can see that it is helpful in many instances, but imagination can also sometimes obscure reality.”) Try to be a little wise here. Say something kind of interesting if you can.

The important part

Be very careful that your claims always support your thesis. And that the examples you use to support your claim are also supportive of your thesis. And the opposite for your counterclaim. It’s easy to forget which side you’re on at different points in the essay.

A strong conclusion

In your final conclusion, draw together the insights of your mini-conclusions and again try to say something really interesting here if you can.

If your claims and counterclaims are solid and you make mini-conclusions as you go through, are solid, your final conclusion should be clear and well supported. This will make your essay (your analysis/argument) seem very well thought-out and therefore convincing.

How To Outline A Theory of Knowledge Essay³

I strongly recommend that, before you start writing your essay, you prepare an outline. This will help you to clarify your ideas and keep you on track as you write.

You can prepare your outline by answer-ing the following questions:

Knowledge Question:

Thesis:

Body 1

- The AoK or WoK
- The claim
- The example (for the claim)
- The counter argument
- The example (for the counterclaim)

Body 2

- The AoK or WoK
- The claim
- The example (for the claim)
- The counter argument
- The example (for the counterclaim)

³ <http://www.timwoods.org/2012/03/02/how-to-outline-a-theory-of-knowledge-essay/>
Accessed on 9th of September 2015

Body 3

- The AoK or WoK
- The claim
- The example (for the claim)
- The counter argument
- The example (for the counterclaim)

Conclusion

- Why is it important that we know about this?
- What are the implications of this finding?
- What is a different view on the subject?

After you have completed your outline, you should keep referring back to it as you write your essay.

Top Ten Theory of Knowledge Essay Tips⁴

Here are my top tips for getting to top marks on your Theory of Knowledge essay.

1. All ToK essays are cross-disciplinary; they are never just about one way of knowing (perception, language, reason, etc) or one area of knowledge (mathematics, natural sciences, human sciences, history, etc). In general you'll want to include at least 3. But be careful about which WoK's and AoK's you include. Review all of your notes to refresh your understanding and make sure you're seeing the relevant connections and make sure (after you've done your research) that you have interesting points to make (claims and counter claims).
2. Make an outline first. The outline is your road map and it's where you make a lot of your major decisions. It will also help you to develop an argument, with each paragraph building on the one before.
3. Research in a lot of different ways: websites, your class notes, talking with people (parents, classmates, your teachers). Find arguments which support both sides of (for and against) your thesis and examples that support your claims and counterclaims. As you develop insights you can use, make sure to record them.
4. Make sure you have clarified the scope of your essay (what you're aiming to do). Make it clear, in your introduction, which WOK's and AOK's 's you're using. And define your key terms carefully, in ways that are useful to your argument. Dictionary definitions rarely do this. At the minimum, be sure to not just use the first definition you find.

⁴ <http://www.timwoods.org/2012/03/02/the-top-ten-theory-of-knowledge-essay-tips/>
Accessed on 9th of September 2015

5. It's easy to forget that ToK is about developing your ability to think for yourself. Give yourself some time away from your outline, to reflect before you begin your real essay. And then try to give yourself a few breaks from your essay as well, so you can come back to it with fresh eyes. It's hard to see the weaknesses of your thinking while you're busy trying to get it done (i.e. in a hurry). Come up with your own ideas.
6. Read at least 3 examples of excellent ToK Essays written by other people.
7. Keep editing. Each of your paragraphs should show opposing viewpoints concisely. Compare two opposing ideas about how natural science might relate to your knowledge question.
8. Use specific and qualified language. Rather than writing that "all science always provides useful insights," instead say that, "**chemistry often** provides useful insights." Words like **often** or **sometimes** (instead of always), **might** or **could** (instead of should) help to keep from over-generalising or saying more than you can actually support in your essay.
9. To prove your essay's thesis you'll need to rely on evidence. Various types of facts are fine (quotations, statistics, true stories from your reading or your own life). Avoid using clichés and common examples. If you can use examples that the marker hasn't heard before this will show that you are thinking for yourself.
10. Read it out loud, after you have finished it. This will help you to find mistakes and areas that don't flow as well as you thought.