

TOK Essay

Notes from Examiners

On what makes a Great TOK essay

“The best papers are written by candidates who introduce a level of nuance to their responses - who are comfortable with uncertainty or a lack of final clarity or resolution. Most TOK instruction should encourage this kind of thinking where binary responses will not do and will never suffice. Candidates who are able to suggest with a certain maturity of thought the necessity of seeing difficult issues from several (often conflicting) perspectives at once are always most likely to be the most successful.

This is not the same as hedging or backing away from reaching definitive conclusions or insights regarding the nature of expert disagreement, the significance of pattern recognition, or the universal value of facing difficult challenges or controversial exploration. Obviously, the best papers offer greater detail, greater insight and fresh examples; in short they offer many possible avenues of inquiry.

More importantly, the best papers offer what a great deal of professional work offers: intelligent, provisional conclusions that shed partial light on ever complex and evolving problems. Partial truths are invaluable. Too many candidates dissatisfied with this lack of resolution unfortunately go the other way and claim that if we don't know everything, then we don't know anything.

Keats, when talking about poetry says ‘the point of diving into the lake is not to immediately swim to the shore but to be in the lake, to luxuriate in the sensation of water’. I would say the point of responding to an open TOK title is not immediately to rush to a conclusion by dismissing anything difficult that gets in the way, or reducing all conceptual problems to an intellectually lazy relativism, but to “luxuriate” in the complexities of human thought and language.”

On the use of examples

Examples should be explained in enough detail to shed light on the subject and extend our understanding, **but the explanation should be as brief as possible to avoid long, descriptive passages**. Examples taken from the candidate's own life experiences, school work or culture, etc., are often the most effective, but all examples should clarify what is being offered by way of a model or analogy or other means of clarifying a point. It is not enough to state an example and expect the examiner to make the connections or to see how the example works. The candidate should explain the implications of the example thus showing why it is, in fact, an example. (November 2018)

With respect to examples, there seems to be a general agreement on the need for **deeper analysis or exploration**. **Candidates should be reminded that an example cannot function on its own**; the examiner is not supposed to infer why the example is helpful or appropriate. It

should be clear from the candidate's exploration how this example sheds further light on a matter or helps the reader to make a connection that otherwise would not be possible. The exploration need not be lengthy, but the reader should have a better or deeper understanding of the subject being discussed or a heightened awareness of the candidate's position. This is what the assessment instrument means by real-life examples [being] fully evaluated. (May 2019)

"Candidates are well aware of the need to provide examples to support their arguments. The main problem is that they still tend to be more descriptive than analytical. Long examples describing the story of the atomic model from Democritus to Bohr were used again and again. Extensive accounts of the orthodox, revisionist and post-revisionist views of the Cold War were frequently used in history as well as poor and ineffective examples on Nazi/Hitler regime."

"Entire arguments are sometimes built on an arbitrary selection of examples – some to support and some to refute – but isolated examples, no matter how compelling, cannot support categorical argument alone. There is a tendency to say at the end of the example: "this example shows... X". That may be the case, but too often it is not as self-evident as the candidate suggests. Each example points to little beyond itself unless the argument in which it is embedded can make the case that the example is representative in ways that are too seldom made explicit. There needs to be greater care given to drawing explicitly the connections between example and argument. Arguments often run along these lines: 'Here is an example of a simple explanation; here is an example of a complicated one. Clearly the simple one is better, so this shows that all simple explanations are better.'"

Many of the examples above do have much potential when they have been mastered by candidates and applied in situations where they support or illustrate the exact claims being made about knowledge. Unfortunately, this is often not the case, and they are sometimes treated with a laziness that can border on disrespect. Examiners are aware that the ideal of the TOK essay as the culmination of the student's personal adventure to date in knowledge is perhaps unrealistic for many candidates on grounds of the limits of personal experience or motivation, but it must be pointed out that the constraints imposed by these factors can be exacerbated by the temptation to rely on external sources designed specifically to "help" with the task. As there is a finite quantity of such material available, shared patterns of essay structure and content across schools often become evident to examiners. If a candidate's first move is to search the internet for material that responds directly to a prescribed title, there is no way back from the "contamination" of thought that has occurred, and the short-circuiting of the process of internalization often leads to correspondingly poor work. Teachers are strongly urged to lead their candidates to formulate a personal and independent response to a title before allowing the wider world into the task that lies before them.

On the use of "well-traveled" examples:

"Well-travelled" examples or clichéd examples, are examples that appear in multiple TOK Essays. As mentioned in every subject report, there is nothing in principle wrong with any of these examples – what is important is that they are used where the point they make is

effective and when care is taken with factual accuracy. At the same time, examiners are human and are likely to appreciate the effort to engage fresh examples, and teachers can play a role in encouraging this. (November 2017)

Key Points

- Candidates are strongly advised to resist the temptation to search for responses to prescribed titles on “help” sites or elsewhere as, once accessed, they contaminate the candidate’s thinking and cannot be “unthought”.
- Some examples are inherently ineffective because they are simplistic and cannot support the quality of analysis that is required in TOK.
- Some examples are employed ineffectively because they do not support the point being made or because they are described without due care for accuracy.
- Some examples have their origins in other DP courses, and these should be generally encouraged.
- Fresh examples are more likely to be effective, but even relatively common ones can work well if they are used with respect for their nature. (May 2017)