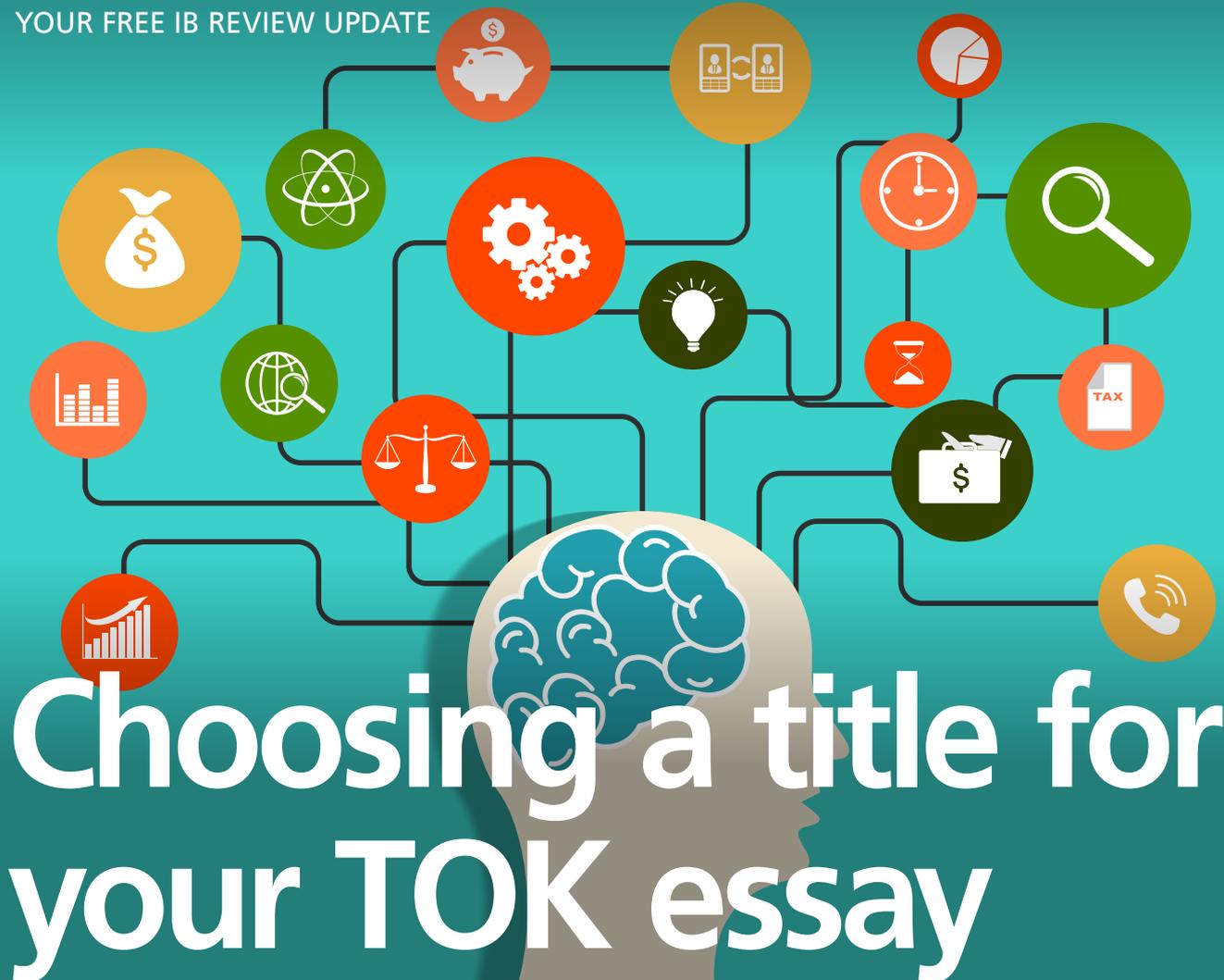


YOUR FREE IB REVIEW UPDATE



Choosing a title for your TOK essay

FOTOLIA

John Sprague provides some advice to help you choose from the recently released essay titles for theory of knowledge

So the TOK essay titles have been released. Which title will you tackle? Which makes the most sense? Here are some general thoughts about the nature of the titles. This advice is not exhaustive. There are many approaches, and collaborative class brainstorm sessions will undoubtedly uncover a number of other approaches you can develop individually. Remember, your hard work and careful planning will have the biggest effect on your final grade.

There are two 'To what extent' titles, both tied to the extent to which you *agree* with the statement. A persuasive approach might be called for here: uncover

the complexity of the issues in the quotations, then clearly identify your agreement or otherwise. If you only *partially* agree, perhaps tie your level of agreement to different areas of knowledge (AOKs).

Two titles ask you to 'Discuss'. Here again, remember that 'Discuss' should be read as an invitation to be *critical*, identifying and then attempting to answer an issue, not just a general 'chat' about things. Treat the title as a *controversy* and engage with it. Never raise a knowledge question (KQ) that doesn't have immediate relevance to the prescribed title. Any KQ that you raise must be relevant to your response to the title — examiners are sensitive to this.

There are no named AOKs this year, so the burden is on you to apply AOKs to the titles. Before writing, test out as many AOKs as you can, looking for novel, surprising connections. Perhaps you want to use ethics to explore

the ‘facts’ in titles 2 and 5? Perhaps art might open up interesting ideas relating to application of ‘patterns’ on the world in title 6? Whatever the case, remain focused on knowledge within the context of AOKs. ‘Knowledge’ alone isn’t a thing, but mathematical/artistic/historical etc. knowledge is. Use the elements of the knowledge frameworks — they are the best way to stay focused on the AOKs. Look for both *similarities* between AOKs and *contrasts* in your analysis. For more advice on completing your TOK essay, see IB REVIEW, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 20–21.

Title 1

This is an invitation to discuss the relationship between the construction of knowledge and its subsequent value. But what does it mean to produce knowledge ‘with difficulty’, and how do AOKs or individual knowers determine what knowledge is valuable?

Title 2

Title 2 suggests that the relationship between facts and theories is circular — one creates the conditions that identify or define the other. Exploring what these key terms mean in the context of different AOKs will be important to your thinking here.

Title 3

Title 3 is *seemingly* a straightforward question about how knowledge in an AOK develops over time and how we decide the importance of events. Explore how our current standards in the AOK are used to evaluate the AOK’s own history. The ‘historical development’ mentioned is not a reference to history as an AOK. Rather, the question draws on the knowledge framework: choose an AOK in which you can identify clear developments in the content or the methodology. Explore the standards of the AOK in that time along with the current standards used to judge the construction of knowledge in that AOK. You might also explore how we decide what makes a ‘key’ event.

Title 4

Title 4 explores how an AOK’s ‘traditions’ (or our common, accepted approaches to producing

knowledge) impact the often personal effects of the ways of knowing (WOKs) on knowing. Don’t get drawn into a tangential discussion of the WOKs. Is the personal/shared knowledge distinction useful here?

Title 5

I predict that this title will be popular. Make sure your analysis is about the causes of disagreement, not a list of disagreements. Find real cases to discuss and don’t fall into the trap of simply claiming, ‘because they’re biased’. Sophisticated responses will stand out.

Title 6

Title 6 is an invitation to explore the assumption that the patterns (‘knowledge’) we impose on the world are not really *there*. The world does what the world does — why should we think our knowledge is adequate in capturing what it is doing? Research Michael Shermer, but don’t be tempted to just summarise his ideas. Don’t just list how AOKs impose patterns — what are the implications of ‘whether or not they exist’?

When brainstorming titles...

- Don’t judge your first ideas — write them down and move on. Come back to them later and decide whether you want to use them.
- Keep a list of KQs while unpacking the titles. They might be helpful to guide your analysis later on: ‘In order to further develop my response, I have to explore the following KQ...’
- Keep a list of concrete examples that you can use to illustrate your points about the nature of knowledge/knowing. Explain them in the essay.
- Always try to develop your early ideas into more subtle points.

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