



# The TOK essay

## Choosing your title

The TOK essay titles have been released. Which one should you choose? **John Sprague** provides some advice to help you decide

**T**ake a look at the TOK titles. You need to brainstorm each one, then think about which title you have the most interest in — this might not be the one that you have the most ideas for. Can you see an opportunity to discuss your internal assessment or extended essay as a response to the title? A personal essay, about you as a knower in the context of a subject community, will be more convincing to a reader.

Choose your final title and stick to it. At some point you'll wish you had chosen another title, but only because things have become challenging. This is precisely the moment when the first, weaker ideas are fading away and the better second and third ideas are bubbling to the top. Keep at it.

Don't forget that this is a two-step process. Get your ideas straight, then worry about how to present them in an essay. If you just start on line 1, get to 1,500

words and hit 'save' thinking you're done, then you've likely just been thinking as you go. Examiners call this 'streaming your consciousness' and it *never* results in coherent, comprehensive and compelling arguments.

Some general points about the May 2019 titles:

- The command term for all but one is 'discuss'. This does not mean 'describe'. It's partly that, but 'discuss' is the opportunity to outline a tension, challenge or issue that needs resolving. 'Discuss' does not mean a chat over coffee, it means 'There's a genuine worry about knowledge here and I'm going to explore a solution'.
- All but one of the titles ask you to discuss a quotation. Do not spend the essay simply explaining the quotation and giving examples to show that it's true. You need to develop some sort of critical stance towards the title and develop a critical argument in response to it.

## Title 1

The relationship between how we think about the 'quality' of knowledge and the number of people accepting it is the dynamic here. Is it simply a matter of numbers? Or might it matter who is accepting it? This question also seems to invite disagreement: it might be possible to develop an interesting argument that in some areas of knowledge (AOKs) the number of people accepting does matter. The key will be to point out *why* a greater number accept, not just *that* large number accept it.

## Title 2

Here the tension might be found in a careful analysis of 'collaboration'. Does this mean sitting alongside others, or might it mean using the material from others even if they are long dead? Might 'collaboration' be stretched to working in *contrast* to others? There's another approach begging to be explored: whether it's even coherent to suggest that an individual can produce knowledge 'in isolation'.

## Title 3

While there's no reference to AOKs, it's always a good idea to ground your discussion in the context of AOKs. Perhaps the lack of an AOK means you can offer a more personal account, but don't let your response descend into personal anecdote. The main tension here seems to be between 'good' and 'true'. These are quite different concepts so on the face of it they should be different, but your analysis of 'explanation' will be crucial, e.g. a 'good-but-false' mathematical theorem seems to be stretching it a bit, but maybe not in another AOK.

## Title 4

'Disinterest' is a term used in the TOK subject guide under history (p. 40), and it is applicable across AOKs. The scope and application of the AOKs will be important to this title, so think about what the problems and solutions unique to the AOK are. It might be that some AOKs use the subjective 'interests'

of individuals as central to their task and methods. One pitfall here is to assume that the claim is true, placing the objectivity of certain AOKs as a model for *all* knowledge. First-year students might still think this, but second-year students should see right through it. Remember that 'disinterestedness' doesn't mean 'not finding something intriguing or interesting'.

## Title 5

The scope and application of AOKs is central here too. Some AOKs might try to limit their scope to only what is offered by the evidence, but it might be worth thinking about the deeper loyalty to certain values like 'objectivity', 'certainty' and 'logical consistency'. Why should those principles be central? Is there evidence to say that, for example, the best way to develop knowledge is to use evidence? Or is this circular? This might be an opportunity to explore the deepest assumptions at work in an AOK. You might consider how any evidence shifts from what is there before you to what is true in all cases.

## Title 6

Title 6 utilises a health metaphor, suggesting that knowledge is a growing thing in need of nurturing. The focus seems to be on methodology, and asks, essentially, whether debate or contrasts create conditions for 'health'. An adventurous student might explore what 'health' might look like in a knowledge community: how might a community of 'historians' or 'physicists' be more 'healthy' than others? Make sure you relate all your thoughts to the 'construction of knowledge claims,' otherwise you might shift into a discussion of people getting along, or not.

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