

Volume 4, Number 1, September 2017

## Teaching notes

# Using the TOK essay planning frame

*John Sprague*

The main idea behind the TOK essay planning frame is to slow down the process of starting the essay, challenging students' usual approach, which is to sit down, start writing and when they reach a certain word count, hit print and call it an 'essay'. Doing this amounts to a one-step process where *thinking* and *presenting* are conflated into a single process. Thinking about what you want to say and presenting what you want to say, however, are quite distinct learning skills. Students must make *decisions* about what they want to say before they try to present it. How many times have you been part of a conversation which sounds like the following:

'Sir, can you help me with my introduction? I don't know what to put in it.'

'Sure. What is it that you want to say?'

'I don't know. I've not started writing yet!'

'How can you introduce your ideas if you don't know what they are?'

This frame is an attempt to differentiate the two learning skills. It is meant to be the *culmination* of the *thinking* phase, where students gather together initial decisions in a conscious way. It is not meant to be a step-by-step guide to the thinking and decision making that goes into identifying an approach — it gathers together those ideas into an explicit argument form. Neither is this frame meant to constitute a 'draft' of the essay (that comes next) — it is merely the relatively abstract outline of the argument. The presenting phase (where they make decisions about strategy, sequencing, wording, etc.) can come after this.

This exercise is an attempt to make the thinking of the students *visible* to us so we can meaningfully engage and help develop those wider critical thinking skills that are transferable to all subjects. Whether or not the essay receives the mark we think it should, we have an opportunity here to make the process a 'success' by helping students think and plan better.

This frame then usually comprises the second of the three 'interactions' indicated by the TOK subject guide (p. 53). Here the guide suggests that it is appropriate that the student has offered some sort of written 'exploration', which can be used as the basis of discussion. I find that brainstorm notes, mind-maps, long trailing streams of consciousness and the like are not helpful here. What I want to see is the sorts of decisions students have made. To ensure authenticity in the process, I can't be the one to take their brainstorms and suggest their directions, they should have made choices and I can engage to help them see those choices to fruition. I am conscious of offering too much help, feeling that at the end of the course, I shouldn't be guiding them anymore, but rather helping them stand by the choices and approaches they have decided upon, taking their ideas and making them better. To do this effectively, however, I need to engage with that thinking much earlier than a 'draft' essay.

After this frame and the discussions that emanate from it, students will go away and make further decisions about how best to *present* their ideas in the form of an essay (the second step of the two-step process): what should go in the introduction, what makes an effective concluding paragraph, how much explanation is required for examples etc. You will engage with these when the student hands in their draft.

Finally, in terms of academic honesty, having a copy of this frame when reading through the final essay is helpful when determining whether there is a worry about authenticity. If the definitive version has no relation to the work that you've seen in this form, then it will be hard for you to vouch that you feel this is the genuine work of the student. This step alone generally defeats the 'pay for an essay' websites that have proliferated over the last few years. A student taking the time to develop these ideas in this form is not the student who will pay for a bespoke essay. Likewise, based on the evidence here, you can identify early whether the ideas are simply lifted from textbooks, peers or classroom examples and encourage them to develop a more authentic and individual approach in their essay.

## Using the frame

### Writing out the prescribed title

This is a good way to emphasise that students should never rewrite the title to suit their argument. Writing on a title that is altered could be a catastrophic mistake, resulting in a zero. Their essay must be a direct response to the prescribed title as written.

### What will your 'answer' be?

Students should aim for a couple of sentence or a short paragraph that draws together the essence of what they have decided to say. Ideally, they can read the PT and follow it immediately with this 'answer' and the two will cohere. If the two don't make sense together then more thinking is required. This box can't be completed except at the end of a lot of thinking.

### Briefly outline what you think are relevant KQs to your response

One of the most contentious elements of TOK is the inclusion of knowledge questions in the TOK essay. The assessment level descriptors mention the use of KQs, leading teachers (quite reasonably) to instruct students to explicitly include them in their essays. Using KQs to develop an argument is a good strategy, but the essay must not shift focus off the PT and onto the KQs. If students don't develop a direct response to the PT, they run the risk of earning a zero. The subject reports directly from the examining team are consistent on this point: you don't have to include explicit KQs in the essay.

So why are they included in the assessment criteria, and why do I include them in this form? The reference to KQs in the assessment criteria is about *relevance*. A good TOK essay is one that develops an explicitly second-order analysis and using KQs as 'stepping stones' is a good way to do this. Students should know which second-order questions pertaining to knowledge are guiding their answers to the prescribed titles (which may or may not be genuine second-order KQs themselves). If students shift their essays into first-order questions (questions using the tools of a discipline rather than interrogating the use of those tools) they cannot score well. This is the single largest reason why students underperform.

I include this section on the form so the second-order approach remains at the forefront of their thinking and analysis. Any KQ (or in this case 'issue pertaining to the construction of knowledge') should be directly relevant both to the chosen PT *and* to the response they've decided to construct.

### List the premises of your argument

Students often forget what an argument actually is. In the words of Michael Palin in the *Monty Python* 'Argument Clinic' sketch, an argument is an 'intellectual process', one that develops 'a connected series of statements designed to establish a proposition'. This means that an argument needs 'premises' or a series of statements which, together, establish the answer referenced above.

This way of developing a TOK essay is also somewhat contentious. Many teachers want to leave room for a discursive essay, but I always suggest a persuasive essay. Having a clear progression of statements towards a definite conclusion provides structure and clarity to the essay. Wandering, waffling, stream of consciousness essays never score well. And while discursive essays might not be stream of consciousness, a persuasive essay that takes the examiner by the hand and says, 'these are the points I'm going to make, and this is where the whole essay will culminate' shows the examiner that the student is thinking clearly, and is in *control* of the material.

Having clearly identified premises also provides a strong structure around which to present the ideas when it comes to writing the essay.

### Premises and evidence

With every premise comes evidence and discussion. This section is where the student can map out the approach he or she will take relative to each premise. Again, if this is done thoroughly (gathering the initial thinking), then translating this into the final essay is relatively easy. This section will be the real core of the student's discussion and will give you the best idea of how the ideas are going to be developed — especially whether or not they are maintaining a second-order approach.

### Conclusion

This is similar to the 'answer' provided above, but here the student sums up the evidence presented in the premises rather than the 'elevator pitch' of the 'answer section'. Students often find this a genuine challenge — identifying just what all their ideas amount to. It should clearly be a version of what their 'answer' was. If it's not then we've identified an inconsistency in the development of the ideas and we have an opportunity to engage as teachers.

### Responding to someone who disagrees with you

One of the worries many teachers have with persuasive essays is that they worry that the students will not consider different perspectives or counter-arguments. This section then is crucial. We all accept the value and need for critical reflection and this section is couched in terms of disagreement, hoping to avoid a less effective, 'some say yes, some say no' sort of approach. The key is to uncover genuine disagreement and then identify where that disagreement lies. It might help students uncover hidden assumptions in their arguments, it might expose a particularly weak or unjustified premise, it might show a illogical conclusion. Whatever the case, asking for a 'disagreement' should amount to a counter-*argument* rather than simply a counter-claim. Students should try to articulate the strongest version of that counter-argument (with premises). Ideally, and this is what is required for a genuine lift into the highest level descriptors, students should engage with that counter-argument and offer a defence against it. Don't let the counter-arguments win.

### ‘So what, who cares?’

Here students can articulate why any of this matters. What is the significance of their thesis and argument? Having some sense of what this all amounts to is another hallmark of the best essays we see — the student is aware of the *tension* relating to knowledge presented in the PT and understands how their approach to the issues engages meaningfully with this. When it comes to actually drafting the product (the essay), using this wider perspective can be a nice stylistic tool to bookend the entire discussion and place it in a context that motivates the entire analysis.

### Knowledge framework links

I include these sections to remind the student to step back from their analysis and consider the wider implications. These elements might not fit explicitly into the final essay, but having considered them will certainly deepen their own awareness of the issues, help them make decisions about which directions to take and help them develop their ideas.

**This resource is part of IB REVIEW, a magazine written for IB Diploma students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to [www.hoddereducation.co.uk/ibreview](http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/ibreview)**