

Common Mistakes : How to Avoid Them

them. Another good source of feedback on these common mistakes is the subject report produced by senior examiners after each examination session.

The essay

Many of the mistakes that are made by weaker students result from poorly developed understanding of the objectives combined with following a weak process. Some of the common mistakes seen in TOK essays are identified below, along with advice on how they can be avoided.

Misunderstanding the nature of the essay

The goal of the TOK essay is not to evaluate the personal values of students, to explore conspiracy theories or to debate moral issues and themes. The essay invites students to consider the factors that influence our willingness to accept or reject information as knowledge. Students who do not appreciate this will often produce essays that fail to address the task and the criteria. Students should also remember that the TOK essay is not a research essay and so is not subject to the same requirements as the extended essay (apart from the requirements associated with academic honesty).

The scope of the essay

It is important that students are realistic about how much they can cover in a TOK essay which can be a maximum of 1,600 words. They are not being asked to consider all of the points that could potentially be made; indeed they should recognize that doing so will limit their ability to explore the points that they do raise in sufficient depth. Students need to be guided to reflect on, evaluate and select the most relevant ideas from the many that they have generated in the planning of their essay.

Unfocused introduction

Successful introductions tend to be dedicated to three main goals:

- establishing some clarity about the key terms and concepts used in the title
- stating a position, that is, agree, disagree, agree with reservations, disagree with reservations
- identifying the WOKs and AOKs that the essay will focus on.

Essays that open with generalized observations about mankind's eternal quest for knowledge tend to set the scene for a descriptive essay, and often cause the student to digress. These introductions also tend to cause readers to quickly lose faith in the purpose of the essay.

Strong essay introductions ensure that they address all aspects of the title, and that they consider any assumptions that are written into the title. They do not assume that the title can only ever be addressed from one position.

Ineffective use of examples

Strong essays will seek to employ a range of specific examples (contemporary, drawn from personal experience, cross-cultural, from multiple eras, drawn from the course) and will make relevant use of them. When we refer to specific examples we mean making reference to a particular artist/artwork or

scientist/scientific theory, rather than making a generic reference to “artists” or “scientists”. Effective examples invariably seek to relate the example back to the title, and to extend, fairly directly, from the example to the knowledge question that it was employed to illustrate. Students should avoid using hypothetical examples. Students who base their arguments on hypothetical examples that are invariably vague, unconvincing and anecdotal usually produce essays that fail to arrive at clear knowledge conclusions.

Students should also avoid using too many examples. Students who approach the essay from a content perspective tend often to make the mistake of filling the essay with large numbers of examples, skipping from one to the other without unpacking the significance of each. This tends to make the essay more descriptive than analytical.

Failure to refer to WOKs and AOKs

Students should identify which WOKs and AOKs their essay will focus on in their opening statements. It is crucial that students use the language of TOK appropriately, making explicit reference to the terms “ways of knowing” and “areas of knowledge.”

Claims are not fully explored and evaluated

Strong students often fail to achieve full return for their efforts because they fail to fully develop the claims that they incorporate into their discussion, and fail to justify and evaluate those claims.

Counterclaims are ignored

Essays that explore counterclaims are more likely to approach the title as a debate about knowledge and are therefore less likely to make the mistake of treating the essay simply as one-sided statements of the student’s own viewpoint or opinion.

Failure to consider implications

Many students fail to achieve the highest marks because although they make sound arguments, they fail to consider the implications of their arguments.

The TOK presentation

Some of the common mistakes seen in TOK presentations are identified below, along with advice on how they can be avoided.

Selection of an unsuitable/inappropriate real-life situation

Some students achieve poor marks because the real-life situation they have selected does not lend itself to effective analysis in terms of knowledge questions. Careful selection of an initial real-life situation is therefore crucial to success in the task.

Too much description of the real-life situation

The TOK presentation requires students to identify and explore a knowledge question raised by a real-life situation. One of the most common mistakes made by students is to focus on a lengthy description of the real-life situation, rather than focusing on exploring the knowledge issues raised by that situation.

Poor knowledge question

Many students select a knowledge question not directly related to the real-life situation. Sometimes the question identified is not even a knowledge question. Every student must understand clearly the nature of knowledge questions before planning the presentation.

Failure to consider different perspectives associated with the knowledge question

The TOK presentation requires an investigation of different perspectives. These are not simply unsupported assertions of different personal opinions, but are grounded in evidence. Teachers should encourage students to be critical and reflective in their thinking, a key part of which is the consideration of different perspectives.

Failure to examine the implications of the knowledge question

Students need to show that the knowledge question explained in the presentation can be applied to other real-life questions.

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