

Theory of knowledge

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Grade boundaries

Overall

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0-3	4-9	10-15	16-21	22-30

Essay

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0-1	2-3	4-5	6-7	8-10

Presentation

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0-1	2-3	4-5	6-7	8-10

Essay

Many thanks to the 511 examiners who marked TOK essays submitted by 86,500+ candidates this session. Thanks, also, to the examiners for your thoughtful and thorough examiner reports which I hope you will find reflected in this subject report. As any current or past teacher of theory of knowledge knows, examining in TOK is challenging, but most examiners comment that there are many benefits as well. The qualifying process allows one to test one's assessment skills against those of the senior team, which is very helpful training for marking one's own students' essays. Reading many essays also allows one to see the scope of materials covered in TOK classes around the world. Many good resources are included in works cited lists, and new examples may be found that might be incorporated into one's own course. If you have a minimum of one year teaching TOK and you would like to apply to be an examiner, visit the website at <https://www.ibo.org//jobs-and-careers/become-an-examiner-or-assessor>.

We advise that this subject report be read in conjunction with the Examiner Preparation Notes (EPNs) for this session which may be found in the Programme Resource Centre. These notes were written for examiners to consult before marking the essays. They provide some ideas of how students might have approached the prescribed titles. The notes are not prescriptive or exhaustive but are simply a way for all examiners to think about the titles in case they are not familiar with them or are not currently teaching the essay portion of the course. As a teacher, one might use the notes as a teaching tool when assigning past titles for practice essays. Although this subject report points out weaknesses in various aspects of the assessment, many strong and positive points are included as well. It is hoped that this report and the EPN's will be useful to teachers in preparing future candidates.

The range and suitability of the work submitted

Overall, the quality of the 2019 essays was better than in 2018. This is very encouraging. Candidates writing in English, Chinese and Spanish all showed improvement, and the candidates who wrote in Spanish improved most significantly.

Essays in Spanish

Examiners have observed some general improvement in the quality of Spanish essays, with more understanding of the prescribed titles shown. There was better focus on the questions, better range and use of examples and better quality of analysis. Perhaps this shows that teacher guidance has improved too. There seemed to be fewer essays which were merely descriptive or where it seemed that no TOK course had been followed.

Another improvement is that fewer essays simply give a dictionary definition of key terms and then do nothing with them. Key terms were used better, and candidates went beyond a mere dictionary definition by exploring and analysing the terms.

There were still some very weak essays, but most examiners noted that they did not mark as many essays in level 1 as in previous sessions. What constitutes knowledge is clear to candidates in areas such as natural sciences, human sciences and mathematics and history. Ethics, the Arts, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Religious Knowledge Systems are areas where candidates have difficulties discussing knowledge and often when these AOKs were chosen, the arguments were often based on superficial generalisations and unsubstantiated opinion.

Overall, in all languages, most candidates clearly understand what is required in the essay. Many examiners commented that there seemed to be adequate teacher guidance this session. It is difficult to assess the

degree and quality of teacher guidance, but there are some aspects of the process, highlighted below, which can certainly be influenced by adequate teacher involvement. Of course, guidance and advice may be offered, but a candidate must accept and heed the advice. The subject report is written with that in mind.

Candidate performance on specific titles

Most essays are well-organized and most have a clear introduction and conclusion. Some introductions, however, are formulaic and contain unhelpful dictionary definitions that give no hint that the candidates have been discussing these concepts throughout their entire course.

Many examiners commented that short dictionary definitions for concepts in the prescribed title rarely allow the candidate to capture the full meaning of the word or concept.

The most popular titles in all languages were PTs 1, 2, and 3, except for Chinese where the third most popular title was PT 6.

NB: In each title this session, there was a word or words that did not receive adequate attention from many candidates:

Title 1: “best measured”

Title 2: “always (never)”

Title 3: “have to be”

Title 4: “essential”

Title 5: “requires”

Title 6: “one way”

Omitting them usually resulted in an incomplete discussion.

Prescribed title 1: “The quality of knowledge is best measured by how many people accept it.” Discuss this claim with reference to two areas of knowledge.

There were many fine essays on this title. The stronger essays distinguished between the role of lay people and experts in accepting the knowledge and what was involved in acceptance. The best essays also challenged the idea that quality of knowledge can be measured. Weaker essays almost always neglected to pay attention to the concept of “measurement” or failed to discriminate between the kind of “people” involved in the measurement.

Prescribed title 2: “The production of knowledge is always a collaborative task and never solely a product of the individual.” Discuss this statement with reference to two areas of knowledge.

In the stronger essays, the candidates took on the challenge of the words “always” and “never.” This allowed for discussion of a range of types of collaboration from the broader sense where one uses the knowledge of those who have gone before or laid the groundwork in a field to the actual teamwork that has produced so much of the world’s valuable knowledge. Excellent examples of composers and lyricists, scientists and inventors allowed candidates to explore various methods of production of knowledge and debate the terms of the prescribed title as well as suggest counter-claims. Weaker essays did not address the ideas of “always” and “never” or they only considered collaboration in a very broad sense as being inspired or influenced by others. One examiner commented that in weaker essays, “even when the

example had a couple of people working together, the candidate did not write about the collaboration between the two working together, but rather focused on how the two were borrowing ideas that had been shared years before.”

Prescribed title 3: Do good explanations have to be true?

The better essays discussed what makes an explanation “good” and then tackled the idea of whether or not a good explanation had to be true. Successful candidates suggested a variety of criteria such as: good explanations satisfy our need to know how something works or why something happened; they are age-appropriate, or they can be understood by those for whom they are intended. In all of these ideas, there is the suggestion that there may be some flexibility in whether or not the good explanation has to be true. A good explanation of what happens to a person after death will be different and perhaps less “true” when it is geared toward a six-year-old than when a medical student is seeking a good explanation. Successful candidates saw this complexity and also plumbed the idea of what “truth” means in this regard. Many cited the theories of correspondence, coherence and pragmatism and were able to use these ideas to satisfy a variety of situations in which an explanation is needed. Less successful candidates responded to the prescribed title question stating that “it all depends,” but they did not fully elaborate on the variables. Another frequent answer was that a good explanation “clarifies” something, but the discussion lacked sufficient depth or did not then discuss how the need for the clarification connected to the idea of the explanation having to be true.

Prescribed title 4: “Disinterestedness is essential in the pursuit of knowledge.” Discuss this claim with reference to two areas of knowledge.

The most successful candidates understood that disinterestedness meant freedom from bias or the kind of interest that would result in a scientist tampering with the results of an experiment for personal or monetary gain or a historian not guarding as much as possible against his or her own national interest, for example, in pursuing knowledge of a historical event to which he or she had a personal connection. As humans pursue knowledge, there are so many opportunities to be swayed from the path of honest, careful and fair behaviour. One examiner commented that it was necessary for candidates to realize that “one can be enthusiastic about a process (about scientific research for its own sake, for example) without *having a dog in the race*, in other words, without having any particular stake in the outcome. There can be joy in the pursuit with disinterest in the outcome.” Successful candidates acknowledged the challenges implied here and also addressed the idea that disinterestedness is “essential.” Less successful candidates misunderstood the meaning of “disinterestedness,” as being uninterested. It is easy to see how one might then argue against the prescribed title, since common sense dictates that one must be *interested* in order to pursue knowledge. This misunderstanding resulted in responses that entirely missed the nuance of the central concept of “disinterestedness.”

Prescribed title 5: “The production of knowledge requires accepting conclusions that go beyond the evidence for them.” Discuss this claim.

This was not a popular title, perhaps because the idea of “going beyond the evidence” seemed risky or somehow wrong to some candidates. An examiner commented that it was “disappointing not to find any essays that saw the key step in formulating a theory as going beyond the evidence in order to put it into a new context.” When one hypothesizes, it would seem necessary to make a leap or speculate beyond what one knows, thus “going beyond the evidence.” Many candidates wrote about religious knowledge systems and, “going beyond the evidence” was linked to faith as a way of knowing. This was certainly a valid subject for consideration and the success of the essay depended on the candidate choosing

examples which s/he could explore and analyse and not simply describe. Also, the idea that “accepting conclusions that go beyond the evidence” is required in the production of knowledge was often not addressed.

Prescribed title 6: “One way to assure the health of a discipline is to nurture contrasting perspectives.” Discuss this claim.

The most successful candidates discussed how nurturing contrasting perspectives helped a discipline to grow or develop and included the idea of cultivation and advancement. Less accomplished responses to the title stopped at the claim that looking at different perspectives was a good thing or even an essential thing but did not address the reasons beyond it being a “good idea.” Although contrasting perspectives were taken into account, the role of “nurturing” was generally in need of more exploration. “Contrasting perspectives” was usually seen as “contrasting views” about evolution or the heliocentric/geocentric models of the universe. Rarely was it understood as coming from e.g. gender, culture or age differences, which, when considered, provided some fresh examples. Finally, few essays paid attention to the expression “one way,” which implied that there were perhaps different methods for assuring the “health” of a discipline.

Recommendations and guidance for the teaching of future candidates

Under no circumstances should the student re-word the prescribed title. It may be that this is a result of students being allowed to re-write the title in their own words to make sure they understand what is being asked. While this sounds like a good technique, a student doing this will often skew the title, omit part of the title or over-simplify the title. After a student discusses the prescribed title with his/her teacher, it is very important that the teacher confirm that the student is addressing the title exactly as it appears on the list of prescribed titles for the session.

In discussing the title with their students, it is very important that teachers assure that the student understands the key terms in the title. This session, if candidates did not understand the meaning of “disinterestedness” or “collaborative,” for example, they were not successful in addressing those titles. Also, teachers should impress upon students that each word in a title is chosen carefully. For example, in prescribed title 1, the question is about the *quality* of knowledge and how it is *best measured*. The aspects seen here in italics needed to be discussed, so it is important to make sure the candidates are focusing on the main points of the prescribed title and not just a part of it. Title 6 employed a metaphor of a discipline as a living entity capable of being healthy or unhealthy. The most successful essays acknowledged the metaphor or at least employed the language of health, growth, nurturing, etc. and used it in the development of the essay. In each title there are words and nuances which teachers must help students understand.

The most successful essays are those that offer a clear discussion of the prescribed title. Teachers are advised to emphasize that the goal is to address the specifics of the prescribed title and, at all times, remember that the essay is about how the candidate substantiates what is claimed in the essay. So, questions about validity of sources, evidence, truth, etc. will naturally occur while writing. What is my evidence? How reliable is this source? What is the relationship between nurturing and health? Examiners point out that the closer the knowledge questions are to the actual topic, the more useful they are to further the discussion.

Too often, when knowledge questions are broached at the beginning of the essay, they are either left unanswered or are unrelated to the prescribed title, so candidates should incorporate this kind of questioning – the kind that arises as a natural result of considering a complex issue - as a way to engage

in second-order thinking. The knowledge questions are what help to make sure the discussion remains a TOK discussion by keeping the focus explicitly on knowledge.

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.

A counter-claim suggests to the examiner that the candidate is aware that his or hers is only one of perhaps many ways of considering a subject. It is also likely that differing points are implied in the prescribed title. Offering and then evaluating a counter-claim helps the candidate to reconsider his or her own perspective or to see how this kind of thinking has aided the production of knowledge throughout history. Asking candidates to identify and possibly explore a different way of considering one or more of the claims made in the essay encourages reflection and self-awareness and ensures a richer discussion.

Presentation

Many thanks are extended to the 88 examiners who moderated presentations this session. It was a successful session and it was pleasing to note that examiners pointed to some improvement in the presentation task, particularly in Spanish where there was noticeable improvement bringing Spanish results closer to the general mean.

The range and suitability of the work submitted

As has been mentioned before, the purpose of the theory of knowledge presentation planning document (TK/PPD) is twofold. On one hand, it provides candidates with a structure for their plan with instructions of what to include in the plan according to the requirements of TOK. The other purpose of the TK/PPD is moderation of a teacher's marking based on the evidence provided by the Candidate and Teacher sections of the document. Therefore, the TK/PPD is for the candidate and the teacher but it also needs to be clear to a third person -the examiner who moderates the presentation.

Although the candidate section of the TK/PPD is divided into boxes, examiners moderate the document holistically by taking both the candidate section and the teacher section into account. They use global impression marking and mark with the presentation assessment instrument, in the same way that teachers mark the presentation they see. The reason for the candidate section being divided into boxes is to help candidates organise their ideas and keep their focus on TOK, hence the guidance provided for each box.

Examiners saw many differences in the effort made to complete the TK/PPD adequately as well as in the understanding of it. Regrettably, TK/PPDs from a few schools were completed as if they were just a box-ticking exercise. Additionally, some candidates did not think about how they were communicating their ideas and left the examiner to try to interpret some disjointed phrases and headings. Nevertheless, most candidates did take the task seriously and many are to be commended for their choice of real-life situations and knowledge questions and for the high level of second-order thinking displayed in the connections, outline and conclusions parts.

Teacher comments have been better at explaining the mark awarded and many teachers are ensuring that their reasons for assigning one mark over another are clear. However, some teacher comments were so vague and brief that they were not helpful at all, or they were phrases copied from the assessment instrument which did not provide any relevant detail specific to the actual presentation. The examiner needs to know what was so 'sophisticated' or 'compelling' about the presentation, or what was 'so significant to the real-life situation and to others'.

Some teachers wrote that the quality of the presentation was not at all visible in the TK/PPD but that it was a 'brilliant' presentation. That is not sufficient, and teachers have to ensure that their students complete the TK/PPD adequately so that there is evidence for the mark awarded.

Recommendations for IB procedures, instructions and TOK presentation planning document

There were still cases of high marks awarded where content was lacking in the candidate section and displayed little or no evidence of TOK thinking. Teachers should encourage their students to follow the instructions in each box. It was seen that when they do not follow those instructions, candidates leave out important information from their TK/PPD. There is still some misunderstanding of what is required from each comment box and how best to adhere to the 500-word limit. For instance, there were too many

overly long descriptions of the real-life situation to the extent that they were longer than the outline. This did nothing for the presentation and used up a valuable number of words.

Teachers need to be careful to enter the same marks in IBIS as on the TK/PPD. There were several cases of mistakes in this respect. Teachers are reminded that the mark that counts is the mark submitted electronically on IBIS.

Some schools have received the same feedback with advice and recommendations in as many as three or four sessions but have not acted on the advice provided by examiners. It is very important that schools take this advice seriously and that they take measures to address the issues highlighted in the feedback.

Recommendations and guidance for the teaching of future candidates

Topics which were socio-ethical or political often led to candidates being unable to move from the first order of thinking to a higher order thinking. This often happens with ethics, where examiners observe that candidates seem to think that a discussion about an ethical dilemma is a discussion about knowledge. Teachers need to help their students keep their focus on knowledge through the question that underpins the TOK presentation “Do(es) the presenter(s) succeed in showing how TOK concepts can have practical application?” (pg. 63 of the PDF version of the guide and on the Assessment Instrument).

Some teachers allowed students in the same cohort to choose the same or similar real-life situations and knowledge questions to students in different groups. This is not allowed (pg. 57 of the PDF version of the guide) and it prevents students from developing original and personal views.

Real-life situations were generally well chosen. Some students chose topics rather than real-life situations, with women’s movements, terrorism and social media being the most popular ones. Some real-life situation choices were not substantive and that made it difficult for the candidate to connect to TOK inquiry (e.g. the Kardashians or music hits). When real-life situations are suitable, candidates can develop good arguments and explore different perspectives that shape them or arise from them.

The quality of knowledge questions is improving but appropriate formulation remains a problem and often knowledge questions are too long and disjointed for effective analysis to follow. Furthermore, appropriate terminology needs to be used and teachers need to help their students ensure that they avoid factual content in the knowledge question. There must not be referencing of the real-life situation in the knowledge question as this almost certainly entails a first-order presentation.

Regarding the connections, although most were adequate some were not concise, and candidates should be reminded that the focus needs to be on establishing how their idea for their knowledge question arose out of the real-life situation and that TOK terminology must be included.

All the boxes are important of course, but the outline is the space for the laying out of the argument. Candidates who did well followed the instructions on the TK/PPD and gave a clear overview of the progression of the presentation. On the other hand, many candidates merely listed steps to show the structure they would follow. This format is not helpful as it has no content; what is required is providing details about specific arguments, further knowledge questions and perspectives that will drive the presentation forward.

Additionally, several outlines did not go beyond the descriptive. For example, the question “How do emotions influence our understanding of history?” led to a list of ways in which emotion influences our understanding of history. Candidates need to get through these descriptive elements and shift into how expert historians or the community of historians manage that influence in order to reach the higher levels of marks.

As regards to conclusions, there seems to be a better understanding of what conclusions are, though some are still not focused on what the presentation has revealed about the nature of knowledge. Conclusions should make reference to the initial real-life situation and provide some sort of closure to the knowledge question which arose from the initial real-life situation. Then they should indicate how they might be relevant to other real-life situations as instructed on the TK/PPD.

The importance of the use of appropriate TOK terminology has been stressed every session. Some misconceptions need clarifying too, for instance, that perception is not perspective, and information and decisions are not elements of TOK analysis, but evidence and interpretation are.

Students who choose ways of knowing for their presentations should consider very carefully how they are explored. The TOK course is about being critically reflective when we produce knowledge, yet candidates often went no further than to speculate on what way of knowing someone must have been “using” when they made some decision or another. The way candidates used ways of knowing leaned towards a definitive outcome without much reflection (usually that reason always leads to good decisions, that emotion never does). Some candidates also showed that they considered ways of knowing as concepts that could be measured, leading them into positions along such lines that someone used more emotion than they used reason. They are thus showing that they do not understand them as *ways of knowing*. The type of generalities and abstractions candidates tend to deal with carry very little analytical bite unless they can be made sense of in the context of an area of knowledge. Consequently, candidates gave more successful presentations when they chose to make links with areas of knowledge.

Teachers are encouraged to incorporate the identification and formulation of knowledge questions into TOK activities and lessons from the very beginning of their TOK courses. Knowledge questions should become second nature to candidates and are the underpinning for the critical thinking goals of the course. Students should also be taught how to identify and investigate different perspectives. Practice with quality, real examples is also beneficial and prevents candidates from relying on oft seen hypothetical examples which are never substantive. Finally, it is also recommended that teachers give their students practice in using the assessment instrument themselves, so they can appreciate the differences, for instance, between an attempted argument, an adequate argument and a clear argument.