

IB Theory of Knowledge

Some basics

TOK is “a course about critical thinking and inquiring into the process of knowing, rather than learning a specific body of knowledge.... The course examines how we know what we claim to know. It does this by encouraging students to analyze **knowledge claims** and explore **knowledge questions**.” (TOK Subject Guide, 2015, p. 8)

What TOK is **not**:

- It is not a philosophy class, though there will be times when we touch on how thinkers in the past have explored knowledge questions. And certainly critical thinking is common to both philosophy and TOK.
- It is not a debating society. My intent in the design of our inquiries is to explore questions and examine multiple perspectives, not to try to prove ourselves right and others wrong.
- It is not a course without a curriculum. In a very real sense, the curriculum is you, the knower. In another sense, the curriculum can be understood to consist of the following components:

The Ways of Knowing: how we gain personal knowledge; basic tools for constructing shared knowledge

language	imagination
sense perception	faith
emotion	intuition
reason	memory

We will touch on all of them at least to some extent. “It is suggested that studying four of these eight in depth would be appropriate” (SG, p. 8).

The Areas of Knowledge: categories and disciplines of shared knowledge

mathematics	history
natural sciences	ethics
human sciences (social sciences)	religious knowledge systems
the arts	indigenous knowledge systems

We will study six or seven of these. IB suggests that six “would be appropriate” (SG, p. 8).

IB Assessments

1. **Essay on a prescribed title:** One essay (1600-word maximum) on a prompt selected by the students from a list of six prompts set by IB for each exam session. This is uploaded electronically by IB and marked by an IB examiner. It is externally assessed and worth 67% of your overall grade for TOK.
2. **Oral presentation:** One approximately 10-minute presentation that explores a real-life/contemporary situation from a Theory of Knowledge perspective. This is the internal assessment for the course – marked by the instructor and moderated by IB by means of an electronically uploaded outline that is part of an official presentation and marking document. The IA is worth 33% of your overall grade for TOK.

The role of TOK in the Diploma program

The IB envisions that “the critical thinking process developed in TOK” will transfer “to the study of the academic disciplines” (SG, p. 4), and that students will have the opportunity in their regular IB courses to engage in and reflect on broader knowledge issues that are relevant to those disciplines.

Along with the Extended Essay and the CAS requirement, TOK forms what IB calls “the core,” which was “introduced by the original curriculum designers of the Diploma program as a way to educate the whole person” (p. 4).

TOK and the EE are marked on the basis of “A” (high) through “E” (low).

The matrix below indicates how grades for TOK and on the EE are translated into bonus points that are added to the student’s overall Diploma point total.

EE/TOK	A	B	C	D
A	3	3	2	2
B	3	2	2	1
C	2	2	1	0
D	2	1	0	0

NOTE: If you earn an “E” for TOK or the EE or in both, this is a failing condition and you cannot receive the IB Diploma.

The role of TOK in your life

My goal for you: A mindset of critical inquiry

By the end of the course, it is my hope that TOK students will be able to affirm these claims:

1. Things are not always what they seem to be. I am ready to examine, analyze, and evaluate carefully what I believe, what others tell me, what I read, what I find on the internet, etc.
2. Part of human nature seems to be that we are searching for meaning and truth, but it is not always easy to say when we have found it. Sometimes the wisest thing I can say is, “I don’t know.”
3. Certainty is very difficult to come by — even in the simplest cases — and whenever we’re absolutely certain of something, we should tread carefully. On the other hand, I choose not to remain frozen in perpetual doubt: that’s both unreasonable and impractical.
4. Many judgments, claims, and standards I have come across are defensible, but many are not. When I keep an open mind, I recognize that virtually all perspectives have at least some value and can teach me something, but this doesn’t mean the “right” answer is automatically to split the difference between them.
5. I have considered several claims and perspectives about any given complex situation, issue, or problem, and I can justify what I know about it.
6. Understanding often carries with it the responsibility to act ethically upon the knowledge I have.