

# 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**.” (previous TOK 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:

## Course Themes: our thematic approach to exploring the areas of knowledge

Core Theme: **Knowledge and the Knower**

Optional Themes: **Knowledge and Technology**      Knowledge and Religion  
(2 required of 5) **Knowledge and Language**      Knowledge and Indigenous societies  
**Knowledge and Politics**

We will touch on all of them at least to some extent, but the focus of DP TOK Year 1 will be on those themes in bold as noted above.

## Areas of Knowledge (AoKs): our categories of knowledge systems

Mathematics                      Human sciences (social sciences)                      The arts  
Natural sciences                      History

**Knowledge Framework: 4 common elements across all knowledge that provide points of comparison and contrast in the exploration of knowledge questions; these elements provide for a more structured inquiry of the themes and of the AoKs.**

Scope                      Methods & tools  
Perspective                      Ethics

## Knowledge Questions

The TOK curriculum centers around the exploration of knowledge questions. Knowledge questions are crucial to effective TOK discussions as they help to make sure that students are focusing on questions about knowledge itself and about how we know things. Knowledge questions help you to move beyond subject-specific questions or specific real-life situations into the realm of TOK. There 3 important qualities of knowledge questions:

- 1) Knowledge questions are questions **about knowledge**—about how knowledge is produced, acquired, shared and used; what it is and what it is not; who has it and who does not; and who decides the answers to these questions. Instead of focusing on subject-specific content or specific examples, students focus on how knowledge is constructed and evaluated.

- 2) Knowledge questions are **contestable** in that there are a number of plausible answers to them. Dealing with these open contestable questions is a key feature of TOK, although some students can find the lack of a single “right” answer slightly disorienting. In TOK discussions, it is perfectly conceivable that answers to a question may differ—what matters is that the analysis is thorough, accurate and effectively supported by examples and evidence.
- 3) Knowledge questions also **draw on TOK concepts** and terminology, rather than using subject-specific terminology or specific examples. Knowledge questions draw on central TOK concepts such as evidence, certainty, values, and interpretation.

**Knowledge Concepts: A continuous exploration of the relationship between knowledge and these 12 concepts will help you to deepen your understanding, as well as facilitate the transfer of your learning to new and different contexts.**

Evidence	Truth	Explanation	Culture
Certainty	Interpretation	Objectivity	Values
Justification	Power	Perspective	Responsibility

## IB Assessments

1. **Knowledge exhibition:** An individually developed exhibition comprising of three objects, or images of objects, and an accompanying written commentary on each object, and how each object provides for a conversation in response to selected knowledge question, not to exceed 950 words in total. This is the internal assessment for the course and will be completed in DP Year 1, marked by the instructor and moderated by IB. The IA is worth 33% of your overall grade for TOK.
2. **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 will be written in DP Year 2, and will later be uploaded electronically to IB and marked by an IB examiner. It is externally assessed and worth 67% 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.