

Notes on Writing a Good Theory of Knowledge Paper

1. Make sure the title (topic) interests you and that you thoroughly understand its implications. Frequently the IBO invigilator is looking to see whether or not the student has a passion for the topic about which he is writing and whether he has considered the topic too narrowly or only in part. The discerning student will also entertain the possibility that the title's seemingly straight-forward claim may be hiding a greater complexity. You are allowed and are in fact encouraged to express a contrary view as long as you can back it up with solid reasons and examples.

For Example:

- Don't take on **title 3** if you haven't had a course in statistics. You probably don't understand the sub-criteria that serve as a necessary foundation for thinking and writing about this topic.
 - **Title 10** from the May 2006 list asks the student to consider reason vs. emotion in accepting or rejecting a claim. The less discerning student will assume that the use of emotion is always to be avoided or is inferior to reason.
2. Type the full title word-per-word at the top of your paper along with the number. If an examiner has to guess which title you are addressing, you have already irritated him to the point that he may be predisposed to give you a lower grade. Examiners are only human.
 3. Just because the instructions to the candidate allow for a minimum 1200 word paper, such skimpy papers rarely make the top grade. Though some students may be able to write so succinctly that their 1200 word paper is equal to or even greater than another 1600 word paper, such dense, quality-laden papers are few and far between. Content that displays a deeper analysis while examining counterclaims in detail takes time and space to develop.
 4. Say a lot about a little rather than a little about a lot. Do select three areas of knowledge that pertain to your topic. Also consider these areas through several filters or ways of knowing: reason, emotion, language, or perception. Don't, however, make a laundry list of every area of knowing and every way of knowing to impress the examiner with the breadth of your understanding. He is more likely to remember the shallowness of your treatment.
 5. Make sure you understand the terms within the title. For example "personal attributes" in **title 4** could mean any of the following predispositions: Gender, sexual-choice, culture, sub-culture, religious affiliation or lack thereof, geography, race, emotional intelligence, physical strength or weakness, style of learning, mental capabilities, political affiliation, degree of patriotic or global commitment. Choose three or four. Don't try to examine all of them.

In **title 8**, what do you think is referenced by "inherited prejudice?" Think it through before you begin to write.

In **title 1**, to what does "propaganda" specifically refer? You may think you understand it, but do some research first on the history of propaganda. You may be surprised.

In **title 7**, do not overlook the last request. “To what extent is faith a legitimate basis for knowledge claims, in religion and **different Areas of Knowledge**?” This question is not only about religion. It could also be about faith in science, history, or art. Think carefully about what *faith* means.

In **title 6** (a greatly overlooked title that could be richly developed) focus on yourself as the knower becoming aware and then attempting to work through the various filters through which you receive knowledge: language, logic, emotion, and perception. Using this knowledge how then do you critically judge and evaluate truth in the areas of knowledge: history, math, art, science, etc. Tell the reader specifically what you think are the great clichés of our time that need to be questioned.

6. Weave your paper into a consistent whole with smooth, logical transitions. Come full circle and perhaps suggest where further research or thought is needed. The mature student thinks holistically and to the future. Do not paste one idea on top another without rhyme or reason.
7. Rid your paper of “mall knowledge” and easy, tired examples. The examiner should be able to tell that you have been in a Theory of Knowledge class and that you occasionally read a newspaper. We have discussed many philosophical ideas and logical fallacies with which most high school seniors would be unfamiliar. Show your stuff!

For example:

- If you are addressing emotion as a way of knowing in any of the titles and you do not refer to Antonio Damasio’s or Gardners’ multiple intelligences research on the brain/body connection, you have only skimmed the surface.
- Hitler was not the only evil in the world. There are an abundance of threats to truth and individual rights in our modern times. They may even exist in the “good ole U.S.A.” Read the front page and the editorial section of your local newspaper. Even better, read the *New York Times*.
- Newsflash! Most enlightened people in the time of Columbus already knew the world was not flat. It would seem (judging by an abundance of student papers) that the only revelation made in the last 500 years was the round earth theory. Take a look at Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything* for less well-known but equally important shifts of paradigms.
- When writing about emotions, revisit the chapter from Reuben Abel’s *Man is the Measure* on the Social Sciences. He specifically addresses when emotion is essential to research.
- Need a good example of the scientific method at work? Have you forgotten the fascinating story of Doctor Semmelweis or the specific examples from Joy Hakim’s article? Conversely (as a counterclaim) have you taken time to consider when science fails? Remember Thomas Kuhn’s scientific revolutions?
- Need some examples of perception that stems from math? Revisit the excerpts from K. C. Cole’s *Mathematics and the Teacup*.
- What about the ideas from the Great Philosophers we covered throughout the year? Socrates’ question “How should we live?”; Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” ; Aristotle’s “golden mean”; Descartes, Cartesian split; Hume’s

treatise on passion and reason, Kant's "categorical imperative" to name only a few, should give you material for any number of questions.

8. Stay away from dictionary definitions and decorating your paper with quotes you pulled from a page on the internet. How about a little original thinking?
9. It doesn't matter what form of internal documentation you use as long as you are consistent. Every idea or word or phrase that is not yours and is not general knowledge should be **cited both inside your paper and on the work cited page** at the end. Failure to **place another person's exact words in quotes** (even if it is just a phrase) **may result in charges of malpractice** (plagiarism) and you will not earn the diploma. Many schools use turnitin.com to check for plagiarism. I know I do. That is why I ask for a floppy disc at the time you turn in your two drafts.

Do avoid making statements about which you are unsure or have done no background reading. You may embarrass yourself, and, might I say, it reflects badly on me that I have not taught you better to be a critical thinker who checks your statements and sources for error. There is a 1 – 3 point reduction for factual inaccuracies.

10. One of our earliest lessons in ToK centered on three truth tests: correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic. I do not see this used or discussed in your papers. We also looked at what tools we could use to check the validity of a source or the reputable nature of an authority. This specific information is also noticeably absent from your papers.
11. When you speak of one of the most important way of knowing, language, you have forgotten that the *vehicle* of language has changed radically in the modern age. In addition to the spoken word, do not leave out media in all its forms: Television broadcasting, newspaper, magazine, and the internet.
12. Speaking of language, many of you in your senior year are in the midst of reading great literature: Camus' *The Plague*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, etc. Why not incorporate these wonderful soliloquies and dialogues on ethics, social responsibility, and love into your essays? In History as well, you are studying Stalin and other movers and shakers. Use them in a discussion on Machiavellian politics.
13. The criteria for evaluating your ToK paper set by the IBO, calls for using numerous specific examples, "drawn from a variety of sources" making sure to incorporate your own experience. The criteria also ask that you use a "high degree of cultural diversity"; therefore, when writing about ways and areas of knowing, make sure you include not only your own experience but also examples from outside your immediate culture. America, Australia, England all represent a western view. Show us math, history, art, literature, and science from other world perspectives as well. Read [newspapers from other countries](#) to obtain a foreign slant on breaking headlines. As International Baccalaureate students you are to think globally.

Even when an American student does take care to use international examples, they are frequently all negative while American habits and customs are contrasted as somehow liberated or more informed. For example:

In Muslim countries, it is perfectly acceptable and even expected for women to be submissive to men as it has been a practice that has been repeated for centuries as dictated by their religious texts. However, in countries such as the U.S. that advocate freedom for all, this perspective is considered “barbaric” since it reminds us of the old days when there was no suffrage for women, when women were expected to be mothers and housewives. On an equal level, some African tribes have accepted the practice of surgically removing a woman’s clitoris thus taking from her any feeling of pleasure during intercourse to reduce the chances of the woman seeking sex from another man. However, to people who have embraced contraceptive tools such as condoms and the birth control pill, this method is disdained based on one’s personal beliefs or background.

Though there is some truth in these claims, there is also some factual inaccuracy as well as some logical inconsistencies. Muhammad was, in fact, quite progressive thinking when it came to women’s rights and instituted several reforms. In Muhammad’s own words, “Women are twin halves of men. The rights of women are sacred. See that women maintain rights granted to them.” Muhammad’s wife, Aisha, took part in politics and was a major authority on the hadith, a clarification of the Qu’ran.

According to a University of Southern California [website](#) on Muhammad,

“ Islam granted woman equal rights to contract, to enterprise, to earn and possess independently. Her life, her property, her honor are as sacred as those of man. Islam also gave woman a share of inheritance. Before Islam, she was not only deprived of that share, but was herself considered as property to be inherited by man.”

If this has changed in part, it is a cultural-political reinterpretation of Islam. It was not an original tenet of the Qur’an as dictated by Muhammad. Conversely, in the West women are “liberated” to the extent that they are free to hold down a job while attending to other traditional roles ascribed to wives and mothers. In the 21st century, they still do not earn equal pay for equal work. The point here is to avoid extreme representations. America is not a utopia for women nor is the Middle East or Africa. Four Islamic nations: Turkey, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, all have had female leaders as does Nigeria currently. Such a prospect has not yet become a reality for America.

As for Africa and the practice of removing the clitoris (a practice forbidden by Muhammad), it is widespread, although against the law. It is also true, although hard to gather reliable figures, that as many as 60 to 80% of the women in various African nations undergo this procedure. To procure a good marriage, however, it is a necessity. Conversely, there are self-elective American operations, though not as traumatic, that also involve self-mutilation of women. The issue here is the relegation of women to physical objects to the point that they feel the need to mutilate or alter their bodies in order to procure a partner. The morbidity and mortality rates are not as high as in Africa, but some of these procedures do result in health complications and rarely in death.

The logical inconsistency within the student’s last sentence resides in an unequal comparison. A comparison is being made between an operation that removes the ability of a woman to feel pleasure while keeping her child-bearing capabilities intact with the ability to delay, control, and even bypass the reproductive function altogether. If you

look at the differing motivations behind both groups of women, they both might comply with these practices in an effort to achieve personal happiness.

From culture to culture the perception and definition of happiness may vary greatly. While some American woman may revel in her freedom to wear revealing clothing, many Islamic women prefer the hajib or burqa. Such a covering insures that men must judge her for her mind or behavior, not merely as a sexual object, yet this is not true of all Islamic women. Aisha bint Talha, wife to the Prophet Muhammad, refused to veil her face, and today in many progressive Islamic countries (such as Turkey) head covering is rare except amongst the lower class.

14. Read the newspaper to get ideas for a new perspective on any issue. For example in the Sunday, February 19, 2006 edition of the *New York Times* three interesting quotes could (in- and-of- themselves) spark a complex, thought-provoking commentary: Look for and attempt to understand the key words:

Example #1

“History is a comfy subject for fiction. We already know what happened, and we usually know what to think about it: how foolish it was to undermine Hitler, to board the Titanic, to march off to defend Jerusalem from the heathens. This makes historical fiction a safe, even conservative, genre, attractive to writers who aren’t looking to go out on a limb.”

Miller, Laura. “The Union Unhinged,” *New York Times* Book Review

The side-postulation, albeit indirect, is that journalists who write about current events have to be more radical and risk-taking. Does that mean their job is less important or more important than that of a historian’s?

The key words are *comfy, safe, conservative, and attractive.*

Example # 2

“As the long war over Darwinism continues, it can seem as if science and religion are approaching a kind of final intellectual battle. But Leon Wieseltier will have none of it. ‘Every true result of scientific research is compatible with the belief in God, if you believe in God.’ Wieseltier, the longtime literary editor of the New Science Republic, said in a telephone interview, ‘Science gives an account of nature, but nature must not serve as the basis for our beliefs about the meanings and the obligations of human life. The wisdom of nature is not the only wisdom there is.’”

“Up Front” Editor’s notes on Leon Wieseltier’s review of *The God Genome* by Daniel C. Dennett, *The New York Times* Book Review, pg.4: February 19, 2006

Hmmm? What do you think Wieseltier means by “true result”? What other forms of wisdom exist? Is the trumped-up war between science and religion therefore a false one, or are there real and deeply dividing issues at stake? What does Wieseltier mean by “compatible” and “wisdom”?

Example # 3

“It was not long ago that men and women voted along similar lines. Both sexes went overwhelmingly for Richard Nixon in 1972 and narrowly for Jimmy Carter in 1976.

Today, though, the gender gap—that men lean right and women lean left—has become a political truism, and a series of new studies suggests that gender plays an even larger role in politics than many believed. Having a son tends to make parents more conservative, it appears, while a daughter makes them more liberal. The parental has become the political.”

Leonhardt, David. “Children, the Littlest Politicians,” *New York Times* Ideas and Trends, Sunday, Feb. 19, 2006. Week in Review, Section 4: pg. 14.

Are you buying this? Leonhardt has his own reservations and writes a quite good, balanced article examining the pro’s and con’s of this new area of research. Do “children mold their parents”? One particularly interesting observation and counterclaim that Leonhardt makes is that according to a study done by a Yale economist, “men in Congress with daughters vote for abortion rights more often than those without daughters. But abortion is not a clear gender-gap issue. Polls show that more women oppose abortion than men.”

Do parents who have female children see more of a need for liberal government and a “safety net”? Leonhardt warns that we must avoid “a common problem in social science: the blurry line between correlation and causation.” To further compound the issue, what happens when a couple has two boys and two girls?

The three examples above illustrate how rich a resource the newspaper can be, IF ONLY STUDENTS WOULD READ ONE!

Keep checking back. As we finish up the papers and more students provide suggestions or warn of pitfalls, I will update this list.