Knowledge and the knower

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Theory of Knowledge

IB Diploma Programme Theory of Knowledge (core component, taken at both levels; 2020 guide, first assessment 2022). TOK reflects on the nature, scope and limits of knowledge and the process of knowing, through the core theme (knowledge and the knower), two optional themes, and five areas of knowledge. Assessment: the ESSAY on one of six prescribed titles (two thirds, external) and the EXHIBITION of three objects with commentaries on one prompt (one third, internal). This handout teaches the knowledge question, the areas, the essay and the exhibition. All worked examples are original.

Must-know for knowledge and the knower:

Family	Content
question	knowledge questions: open, second-order, about knowing
areas	history, the human sciences, the natural sciences, the arts, mathematics
essay	one of six prescribed titles: unpack, argue, exemplify, weigh perspectives, imply
exhibition	three real objects + commentaries on ONE prompt: TOK in the world
knower	perspectives, bias and the communities that shape what we know

The knowledge question

TOK thinks through the **knowledge question** : a question about KNOWING rather than about the thing known. First-order: why did the wall fall? Second-order: how does the historian KNOW why the wall fell, and what would count as a better answer? The discipline: a good knowledge question is open (multiple plausible answers), general (about an area or method, not one case), and contestable (worth arguing both ways); the course's central question is simply: how do we know that?

> **Worked example.** The school's ranking list turns first-order (who came first?) into second-order (what does the rank MEASURE, and what does it miss?): measurement itself becomes a knowledge question.

The five areas of knowledge

The five **areas of knowledge** differ in method, not dignity: HISTORY (evidence and interpretation: the trace is mute until read), THE HUMAN SCIENCES (methods on people, who answer back: surveys, models, the observer effect), THE NATURAL SCIENCES (the experiment: prediction, falsification, the community replicating), THE ARTS (expression and interpretation: the work means, and the meaning is argued), and MATHEMATICS (proof: within its axioms, certainty; the axioms themselves chosen). The strongest TOK moves compare: what 'explanation' or 'evidence' means differs by area, and the comparison is the insight.

Worked example, continued. The rank again: in the human sciences the rank is a model output (chosen weights); in mathematics the ordering is exact but empty of persons; in history a league table becomes evidence only when a historian asks it something. Same list, three knowledges.

The essay on a prescribed title

The external essay answers ONE of six **prescribed titles** for the session. The craft: UNPACK the title (define its loaded words before using them), argue (claims met by counterclaims, not assertion), exemplify through two areas of knowledge with REAL cases, weigh **perspectives** (the knower's, the community's, the critic's), and close on implications (what follows if the argument holds). The failure modes: the patched summary (course notes stapled to a title), the one-area essay, and the example-free argument.

Worked example, continued. A title on expectations and interpretation: unpack (expectation as prior belief), argue in history (the archive read for confirmation) against the natural sciences (the hypothesis that hides the anomaly), weigh the interpreter's perspective, and imply: disciplines are trained habits of expectation.

The exhibition

The **exhibition** is internal: THREE real objects (specific, dated, ours or our community's: a ticket, an app screen, a textbook page), each with a commentary, exploring how TOK manifests in the world around us. The discipline: one IA prompt chosen from the course's list (for example, what role do experts play in influencing our acquisition of knowledge?), each object linked to the prompt by a DIFFERENT route, the commentary showing the link (not describing the object), and the whole proving the prompt lives in the student's world.

Worked example, concluded. On the experts prompt: object one, the weather app's icon (the expert made invisible as a number); object two, a nutrition label (the expert translated into a traffic light); object three, a chess engine's match record (the expert replaced and consulted at once): three relations to expertise, one prompt, one exhibition.

Checklist

- Knowledge questions second-order, open, contestable (question).
- Five areas compared by method: evidence, explanation, proof (areas).
- Title unpacked, argued with counterclaims, two areas, perspectives, implications (essay).
- Three real objects, one prompt, three different links (exhibition).
- The worked ranking-list and experts-prompt cases understood (worked). Boundary notes: the examiner must see the thinking: questions second-order, arguments met by counterclaims, objects real and linked. All worked examples are original.