

*The ToK Café Guide*

# Planning your Theory of Knowledge Essay:

## The Three 'C's Approach

Choose with **Curiosity**

Compose with **Clarity**

Craft with **Coherence**





## Why the Three ‘C’s?

(because in ToK, “Why” is always the most important question)

This approach to writing the IB Theory of Knowledge essay has been distilled from two decades of teaching Theory of Knowledge, coaching students through the writing process, and studying examiner reports. Throughout all the curriculum or marking rubric changes, the same criticisms from the examiners persisted over and over:

- ☞ mechanical or formulaic writing,
- ☞ vague terms, and
- ☞ weak counterclaims.

All stem from students approaching the ToK as a dissertation (as is normal for academic papers) rather than a discourse!

The solution is not a template you found online; this is, in fact, a very bad idea for reasons to be discussed. The real and actual solution is a change of your mindset as you take on the ToK essay. That’s what the three ‘C’s are all about!

## WHAT ARE THE THREE ‘C’S?

### CURIOSITY

Always begin with curiosity, which is at the heart of Theory of Knowledge. Right from the beginning, when you are selecting the prescribed title for your essay, engage your sense of curiosity. Nothing delights an examiner more than feeling a sense of genuine curiosity in the writing.

### CLARITY

The examiner wants to see a sense of personal clarity emerging during the process of your writing the essay. As you write, the distinct meaning of key terms (ugh - hate that label, but we’ll get to that) within each Area of Knowledge should emerge, like a hazy figure in the fog becoming more distinct as you approach it.

### COHERENCE

This is not to be confused with structural coherence, although that is important. We’ve also seen the standard “Claim A - Counter-claim B” structures in the essay templates (and so have your examiners). Coherence is the relationship between ideas that is the basis for good structure! Coherence is the harmonious relationship between your claims and counterclaims within and between the Areas of Knowledge.

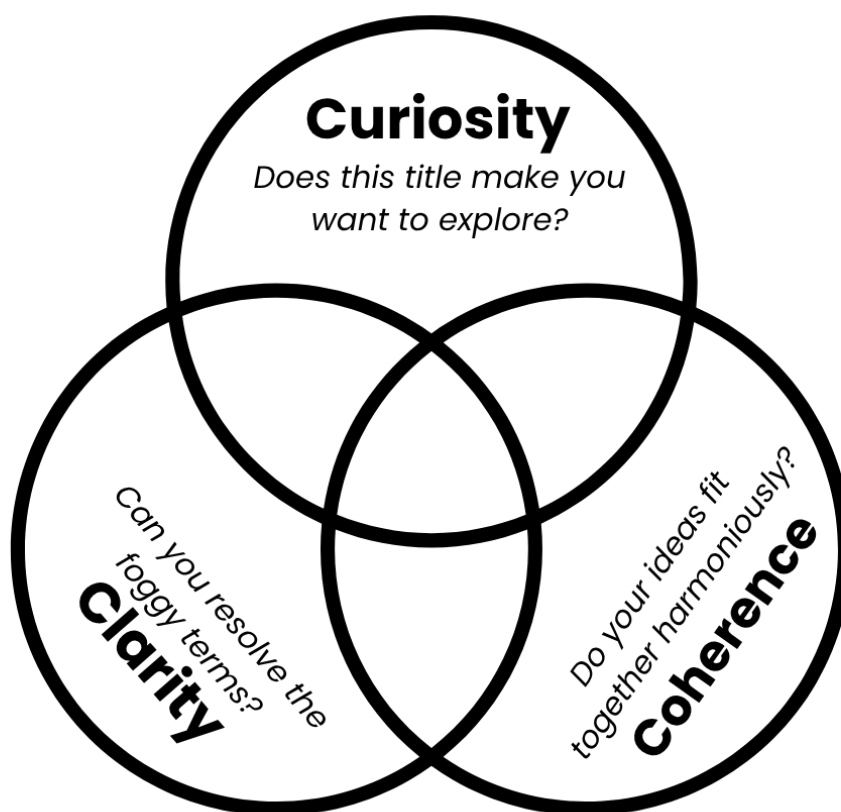
Remember - The Three 'C's are not a template.

They are a mindset for approaching the writing of the essay that minimizes frustration and lets the writing flow more naturally! The 3-Cs shift your mindset from "how do I fill this template?" to "what do I actually think about this question?"

(And spoiler alert - the examiners have seen all the same templates online that you have, and they can tell the difference between filling in a pre-made template and authentic critical engagement! They prefer the latter.)

## Triangulate using the 3 'C's:

Could we have a ToK resource without a Venn diagram? Probably not, so here's ours.



Your best essay is found where curiosity, clarity and coherence overlap! Planning your essay involves making choices that will keep your essay in the target zone!!

## STEP 1: CHOOSE WITH CURIOSITY

Finding the title that sparks genuine interest

The first step in planning your ToK essay is choosing your prescribed title, and this is where most students make their first mistake.

They pick the title that sounds easiest or seems shortest. But here's what happens if you're not genuinely curious about the question - you will struggle to write 1,600 words that feel authentic. And examiners can tell.

### THE CURIOSITY TEST

Before you commit to a title, ask yourself these three questions:

□ Do I actually care about the issue behind this title?

If the question feels like a chore from the start, it'll only get worse.

□ Can I think of real examples that spark wonder or make me genuinely curious?

If examples feel forced or generic, that's a warning sign.

□ Will I still be interested after three late nights of researching and writing?

Curiosity sustains you through the hard parts. Pick a title you'll want to keep exploring.

Use the worksheet on the following page to write out your reactions and ideas for the title that stimulates your curiosity. If more than one seems interesting, make copies of the page so you can go through the process with each title.

*WORKSHEET - CHOOSE WITH CURIOSITY*

My potential prescribed title:

Initial gut reaction - what interests me about this?

Examples or situations that come to mind:

*CHECKLIST:*

- ☐ Do I care about this topic?
- ☐ Can I think of real world examples that inspire genuine curiosity?
- ☐ Will I still be interested after three late nights working on it?

If you can check each question, that's Green Light #1!

Next: Step 2 - Compose with Clarity (identifying foggy terms)

## STEP 2: COMPOSE WITH CLARITY

### IDENTIFYING AND RESOLVING 'FOGGY TERMS'

Once you've chosen a title that genuinely interests you, the next step is to look for what I call **foggy terms** - *words or concepts in the title that shift meaning depending on context or Area of Knowledge*.

Most ToK guides tell you to identify "key terms", but that doesn't help you plan how to show clarity in your thinking. Some key terms are perfectly clear as they are so they don't help you with your job. What you're really looking for are terms that are ambiguous or nuanced, whose meaning changes depending on where you're standing.

Words like truth, knowledge, proof, values, or evidence are classic foggy terms. They seem clear at first, but when you examine them closely in different Areas of Knowledge, their meaning shifts like a figure emerging from fog. Your job in the essay is to take the foggy terms and show how different shapes can emerge depending on the context or Area of Knowledge.

### THE CLARITY TEST

Look at your chosen title and ask: *Which terms have meanings that could shift depending on the Area of Knowledge or perspective?*, then circle or underline those foggy terms.

**For each foggy term, can you explain how it means something different in two different Areas of Knowledge?** This is where clarity emerges - when you can show how truth in mathematics is fundamentally different from truth in history, or how evidence in the natural sciences differs from evidence in the arts.

*WORKSHEET - COMPOSE WITH CLARITY (PART 1)*

My chosen prescribed title:

NOTE - you only need to have one foggy term to make an essay work. Space is provided for two only so you can compare how well they each resolve.

**Foggy term #1:** \_\_\_\_\_

Area of Knowledge #1:

Area of Knowledge #2:



WORKSHEET - COMPOSE WITH CLARITY (PART 2)

**Foggy term #2:** \_\_\_\_\_

Area of Knowledge #1:

Area of Knowledge #2:

Personal Experience or example that helps to clarify the meaning:

CHECK:

- ☐ Do your foggy terms resolve differently in two Areas of Knowledge? **Green Light #2!3**

## Step 3: Craft with Coherence

### BUILDING BALANCED ARGUMENTS THAT FIT TOGETHER

The final step in planning your ToK essay is testing for coherence – making sure your claims, counterclaims, and examples actually fit together in a way that creates genuine exploration, not just debate for debate’s sake.

This is where most students fall into the classic “strawman” trap. They present a claim they believe, then offer a weak counterclaim they can easily dismiss. Examiners spot this immediately, and it hurts your essay’s coherence.

#### WHAT COHERENCE ACTUALLY MEANS:

Coherence isn’t just about structure (though structure matters). It’s about the relationship between your ideas – do your claim and counterclaim genuinely challenge each other? Do your examples across both Areas of Knowledge echo or parallel each other in interesting ways? Do the different claims, counterclaims and examples have parallels or similar aspects?

Strong ToK essays present genuine intellectual tension, where you’re honestly uncertain which perspective is stronger. That uncertainty, explored thoughtfully, is what examiners want to see.

#### FOR EACH AREA OF KNOWLEDGE YOU’RE PLANNING TO USE:

1. **What’s your main claim?** This is your argument – the position you’re exploring.
2. **What’s your strongest counterclaim?** Not a weak version you can easily knock down, but the most genuine challenge to your claim.
3. **The honesty check: Does your counterclaim make you genuinely uncomfortable?** Does it force you to think harder about your claim?

If the counterclaim feels too easy to dismiss, it’s probably a strawman. Find a stronger opposing perspective.

Use the worksheets on the following pages to develop your claims, counterclaims, and examples for both Areas of Knowledge.

WORKSHEET - CRAFT WITH COHERENCE (PART 1)

Area of Knowledge #1: \_\_\_\_\_

Claim

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Related Examples -

Example	Supports or challenges

Counterclaim

--

**Honesty check:** Is this *genuinely strong* or just a *straw man*? If it is, print another copy of this sheet and try again.

WORKSHEET - CRAFT WITH COHERENCE (PART 2)

Area of Knowledge #2: \_\_\_\_\_

Claim

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Related Examples -

Example	Supports or challenges

Counterclaim

--

**Honesty check: Is this genuinely strong or just a straw man?** If it is, print another copy of this sheet and try again.

## COHERENCE REFLECTION

### FINDING THE CONNECTIONS

Now that you've developed claims and counterclaims for both Areas of Knowledge, look for coherence between them:

**Describe how your claim/counterclaim pairs echo or parallel each other across the two AOKs?**

**What patterns or tensions emerge when you compare the two Areas of Knowledge?**

**Are both sets of arguments equally balanced?**

If you have balanced, parallel arguments across both AOKs, that's Green Light #3! You now have the coherence needed to write a strong ToK essay. Next - putting it all together!!

## Three Green Lights? You've Found Your Essay!

### QUICK PRE-WRITING CHECKLIST

Before you start drafting, confirm you've got all three green lights:

- ☐ Curiosity: I'm genuinely interested in exploring this question
- ☐ Clarity: I can clarify foggy terms in meaningful ways across AOKs
- ☐ Coherence: My claims and counterclaims are balanced and genuinely challenge each other
- ☐ I have specific examples (not generic ones)
- ☐ I can explain my thinking without getting lost

### NOW WHAT?

This planning template gives you the foundation for a strong ToK essay, and working on the planning template has helped you practice the right mindset to succeed in writing it. The actual writing consists of connecting your ideas, avoiding common pitfalls, allowing clarity to be revealed, as you explore (but not necessarily answer) the question. Now is when all your writing skills from years of IB come into play as you put the discourse between you and the ideas implied in the essay title onto the page.

***I'd wish you the best of luck, but if you have the right mindset - luck doesn't matter!***

## Blatant marketing material

Over many years of teaching in the classroom, I've genuinely enjoyed coaching students through their ToK essay writing process. It's the reason I published this mini-guide, and why I love continuing to coach ToK students preparing for their assessments.

So if you are feeling overwhelmed? Or not sure if your three green lights are actually green?

I've got you - additional support and opportunities for 1-on-1 coaching and essay feedback are available!

### GET ADDITIONAL SUPPORT:

- ☐ Subscribe to The ToK Café Newsletter at [thetokcafe.substack.com](http://thetokcafe.substack.com) - biweekly tips, strategies, and insights for writing stronger ToK essays. Free. No spam. Unsubscribe anytime.
- ☐ Paid 1-on-1 Coaching Sessions and essay proof-reading/feedback
- ☐ I offer 1-on-1 coaching sessions where we deep dive into some of the exercises in this workbook, and many more, with my personal feedback, guidance and support along the way. Sessions are each about an hour in length.
- ☐ Essay review and feedback services provide detailed commentary on your draft or final essay, helping you identify what's working and what needs refinement.
- ☐ Visit [thetokcafe.ca](http://thetokcafe.ca) by scanning this QR code:



**Keep thinking clearly,**

*Rob*

*The ToK Café*