Ethical Restrictions in Human Sciences

Lesson 4: Writing a TOK Essay

Focus: *How can knowledge users develop strong, structured arguments?*

Objectives	**Write a fully developed TOK essay claim using the TOK essay structure.** **Apply real-world examples and counterclaims to support arguments.** **Engage critically with TOK concepts (e.g., responsibility, power, and perspective).**

Activities	**1. Introduction (5 mins)**
	● **Guiding Question:** *"How do we develop a strong argument in a TOK essay?"*
	● **Recap:** What makes a TOK essay unique?
	● Focus on knowledge (not merely opinions).
	● Use real-world examples drawn from multiple Areas of Knowledge (AOKs).
	● Include counterclaims.
	● Refer to TOK concepts.
	● Reflect on the implications and limitations of your argument.
	   ○ Teacher Tip: Show a quick visual of the TOK essay structure (introduction, body claims, conclusion), highlighting where this developed paragraph fits in.
	
	2. Examining a Strong TOK Essay Claim (10 mins)
	● Break down an example paragraph of your choice with students. Ask them to annotate:
	   ○ Claim: The stance or argument addressing the TOK prompt.
	   ○ Example: A real-world situation supporting or illustrating the claim.
	   ○ Counterclaim: A contrasting perspective that challenges the claim.
	   ○ TOK Links: Explicit connection to TOK concepts and reflection on how knowledge is produced or validated.
	● Discussion Questions:
	   ○ How does the example strengthen the claim?
	   ○ Which Ways of Knowing (WOKs) or Areas of Knowledge (AOKs) are relevant here?
	   ○ Does the counterclaim effectively challenge the claim, encouraging deeper exploration?
	
	3. Writing Task: Drafting a TOK Paragraph (15 mins)
	● Select a prompt: Provide students with a list of essay prompts to choose from. These could be prompts that you have prepared (e.g., "To what extent do power structures shape the production of knowledge in the human sciences?") or a prescribed title from the official IB list.
	● Students plan the paragraph, including notes on:
	   ○ Claim: A statement connecting directly to the prompt.
	   ○ Example: A real-life scenario that demonstrates the claim.
	   ○ Counterclaim: An alternative viewpoint or critique that challenges the initial argument.
	   ○ TOK Link: Reference how the TOK concepts influence what is considered reliable scientific knowledge.
	● Write the paragraph: Emphasise clarity, coherence, and the TOK focus (not just describing the event but analysing how it affects knowledge).
	   ○ Teacher Tip: Remind students to refer to the AOK and avoid simply praising or criticizing—instead, focus on how knowledge is formed, judged, and communicated.
	
	Peer Review & Refinement (10 mins)

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	● Students exchange their writing in pairs or small groups, and use the TOK Essay Checklist to give feedback. Use the following discussion points to help students' develop their feedback:
	  ○ Claim: Is it clearly stated, and does it tie back to the prompt?
	  ○ Example: Is it concrete, relevant, and well-explained?
	  ○ Counterclaim: Is it meaningfully different or just a weaker version of the claim?
	  ○ TOK Link: Does it show awareness of how knowledge is justified, constructed, or challenged?
	  ○ Language and Clarity: Are there any vague statements or unclear references?
	● If time permits, students revise immediately based on peer feedback.

Reflection	Discuss the following reflection questions in open discussion or exit ticket format: ● What was the most challenging part of writing this? ● How do different perspectives influence debates on ethics in human sciences? ● How does this practice help prepare for the TOK essay assessment? Extension / Homework ● Option A: Expand the paragraph by adding another real-world example or a deeper analysis of the counterclaim. ● Option B: Research a different context (another region or era) to see if the claim holds universally or changes with cultural/political conditions. ● Option C: Draft an introductory or concluding paragraph linking the argument to a broader TOK theme.
Resources	● Lesson Slides ● Example TOK Essay prescribed titles ● Essay Checklist
TOK Concepts	**Responsibility**: What responsibilities do corporations, governments, and researchers have when applying human sciences to collect and use personal data? Should the pursuit of knowledge and profit ever outweigh the duty to protect privacy and autonomy? **Power:** How does surveillance capitalism shift power between individuals, corporations, and states? Who ultimately decides what uses of human sciences are "ethical" or acceptable? **Perspective:** How do different cultural and political perspectives (e.g., China's social credit system vs. Western democracies) shape debates about surveillance, privacy, and manipulation? Can ethics ever be universal in human sciences, or are they always context-dependent?

Critical Thinking Concepts	● **Bias & Power:**
	  ○ Challenging Neutrality Bias: Students examine the assumption that human sciences are inherently neutral, questioning how profit motives, government agendas, or corporate interests distort how research is conducted and applied.
	  ○ Interrogating Authority: Students consider who decides what counts as legitimate or ethical research in the human sciences, and how these definitions are shaped by power structures—e.g., governments, tech corporations, universities, or ethics boards.
	● **Exploring Contexts and Expert Opinions:**
	  ○ Evaluating Credibility: Students reflect on how institutional authority (e.g., university approval, government funding, corporate backing) affects perceptions of credibility, and how this may mask conflicts of interest or selective evidence.
	  ○ Analyzing Ethical Framing: Students explore how political, social, or economic pressures (e.g., election campaigns, surveillance systems, data-driven advertising) shape whether human sciences are accepted as knowledge or condemned as manipulation.
	● **Responsiveness and Flexibility of Thought:**
	  ○ Weighing Competing Views: Students compare the ideal of human sciences as objective knowledge versus real-world evidence of misuse (e.g., Cambridge Analytica, social credit scoring), and consider whether the problem lies in the method or the institutions applying it.

- ○ Revising Beliefs: Students reflect on whether their understanding of responsibility in human sciences has shifted after examining unethical cases, and reconsider what counts as legitimate or trustworthy knowledge.
- **Extrapolation and Reapplication of Principles:**
  - ○ Making Real-World Links: Students connect issues of data harvesting, surveillance capitalism, and algorithmic bias to broader debates about democracy, human rights, and public trust in institutions.
  - ○ Ethical Reasoning: Students consider the responsibilities of researchers, companies, and governments in applying human sciences, and weigh the moral cost when privacy, consent, or human dignity is compromised.