

# InThinking Theory of Knowledge Workshop

For Teachers New to the IB Diploma

Berlin, Germany

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## Overview

The aim of this ten-session workshop is to give teachers new to Theory of Knowledge a survival pack that will enable them to approach the TOK course with confidence and enthusiasm. The main question in TOK is "How do you know?" Given the breadth of the course, much of the workshop will focus on content. We will help you to structure key ways of knowing and areas of knowledge, and, using practical activities, give you a sense of "the spirit of TOK". There will also be sessions on the essay and presentation in which you will have the opportunity to familiarise yourself with the assessment rubric and get a feel of the level of work required.

## Agenda

### Session 1: Getting Started: Knowledge Issues

We will look at several different ways of starting the course and capturing student interest. This will lead to a discussion of knowledge issues, and how we can ensure that the course does not degenerate into general studies. We will consider the relevance of the learner profile to TOK and make some preliminary comments on how to structure the course.

### Session 2: Perception

Perception is a key source of knowledge, and our claims to know in almost every subject are based on it. However, "there is more to perception than meets the eye", as can be shown by a brief consideration of visual illusions. We then consider the extent to which we should trust our senses and the implications of the fallibility of perception for different areas of knowledge.

### Session 3: Language

A huge amount of our knowledge comes to us in the form of language, and without it our knowledge would be limited to the narrow confines of our own experience. We tend to think of language as a transparent medium, but what one person means when they say something may not be what another person understands when they hear it. In this session, we focus on the ambiguity of language and the ways in which it can subtly influence our perception of reality.

### Session 4: Reason & Emotion

Reason has traditionally been seen as an important source of knowledge and emotion as a key obstacle to it. The extent to which these twin assumptions are true will form the starting point for our discussion. Among the issues that will be touched on are: What is reason? How rational are we? Can one be too rational? How can emotions obstruct knowledge? How can the emotions contribute to knowledge? Should we always trust our intuitions?

### Session 5: Mathematics & the Natural Sciences

Mathematics and the Natural Sciences are widely seen as two of the most reliable areas of knowledge. In this session we compare and contrast these two ways of knowing and consider the extent to which they can give us certainty about the world. Among the topics discussed will be the nature of mathematical proof, the strengths and weaknesses of the scientific method, and the extent to which science should be seen as a model for knowledge in general.

### **Session 6: The Human Sciences and History**

The Human Sciences and History deserve our attention because, among other things, they contribute to our understanding of our own nature. However, special challenges arise in studying human beings that do not arise when we study other natural phenomena. We will look at some of these challenges and then ask whether the Human Sciences and History have their own distinctive methodologies and consider the extent to which they can give us objective knowledge.

### **Session 7: The TOK Essay**

In this session, you will have the opportunity to read and grade an essay and discuss its merits and demerits. This will give you a hands-on understanding of the assessment criteria. Particular attention will be drawn to the importance of the “knower’s perspective”. We will also discuss how best to prepare students for the essay and help them avoid common pitfalls.

### **Session 8: The Presentation**

According to the IB rubric, “The TOK presentation requires students to identify and explore the knowledge issues raised by a substantive real-life situation.” One of our jobs as teachers is to guide students towards a good choice of topic which is not too broad and which is clearly focussed on the question “How do you know?” We will look at some videos of student presentations and discuss their various strengths and weaknesses.

### **Session 9: Ethics & the Arts**

Some people claim that when it comes to Ethics and the Arts, one cannot speak of knowledge but only of opinion, and that values, like beauty, are in the eye of the beholder. The relativity of values debate will occupy much of our attention in this session. Among other things, we will ask whether it makes sense to speak of expert opinion in these areas, and consider the extent to which values underlie all of our claims to knowledge.

### **Session 10: Concluding Plenary**

TOK lies at the centre of the hexagon and is central to the IB diploma’s education philosophy. How can we promote TOK thinking across the curriculum and best involve our colleagues in the programme? In this concluding session, we also look at useful resources, including the OCC, and deal with any remaining burning issues.