May 2026 Theory of Knowledge Essay Tips & Tricks

You need help. And I got your back. Below is the holy grail of TOK Essay knowledge from my brain. Ok. Maybe that's a bit dramatic, but these are the first thoughts about breaking down the title and organizing it that came to my mind.

Each section of this document is broken into two parts: an initial prompt breakdown, and then sample essay organizations. Navigate to each title here:

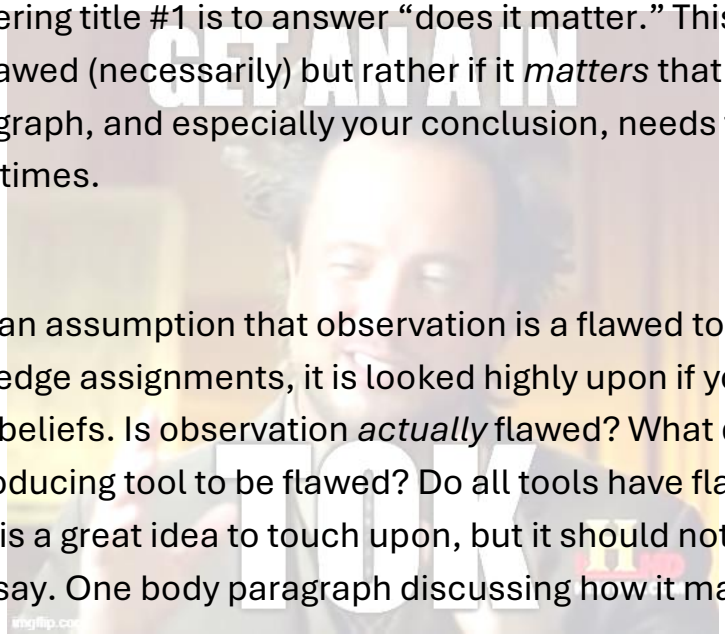
Your next step is to find evidence and examples on my YouTube channel this week. Each essay title will be featured in a different video that gives you great examples to get you started. Remember that every TOK essay needs specific, tangible Real Life Example (RLE's).

TOK Essay Title #1

In the production of knowledge, does it matter that observation is an essential but flawed tool? Discuss with reference to the natural sciences and one other area of knowledge.

Title #1 Breakdown

The key to answering title #1 is to answer "does it matter." This is not about if observation is flawed (necessarily) but rather if it *matters* that it is flawed. Every body paragraph, and especially your conclusion, needs to use this phrase multiple times.



This title makes an assumption that observation is a flawed tool. As with all Theory of Knowledge assignments, it is looked highly upon if you evaluate any assumptions or beliefs. Is observation *actually* flawed? What does it mean for a knowledge-producing tool to be flawed? Do all tools have flaws? If so, it may not matter. This is a great idea to touch upon, but it should not be the main focus of your essay. One body paragraph discussing how it may not be flawed is enough.

I really like the Arts here, but most students will choose this and discuss (to the boredom of examiners) how the act of interpretation by viewers of [insert Banksy or Monet or *Fountain* here] matters and doesn't matter. If you choose the Arts, go in a unique route and avoid this bland angle. Choosing HS would provide for some great contrasting examples.

As a tool, one could assume that observation is being considered a Way of Knowing (WOK). WOK's used to be a core part of the TOK curriculum, but were taken out in the last course guide. This could possibly be because there are *many* different ways to know something, and observation (closely related to sense perception) really works as a WOK. I can see top scores integrating and comparing observation to other tools and WOK.

It's essential that observation be connected to empiricism in the Natural Sciences (NS). As the title requires the NS, it's expected that you understand that empiricism is the gold standard for gathering data and proving/justifying knowledge in this AOK (when it's possible, of course!).

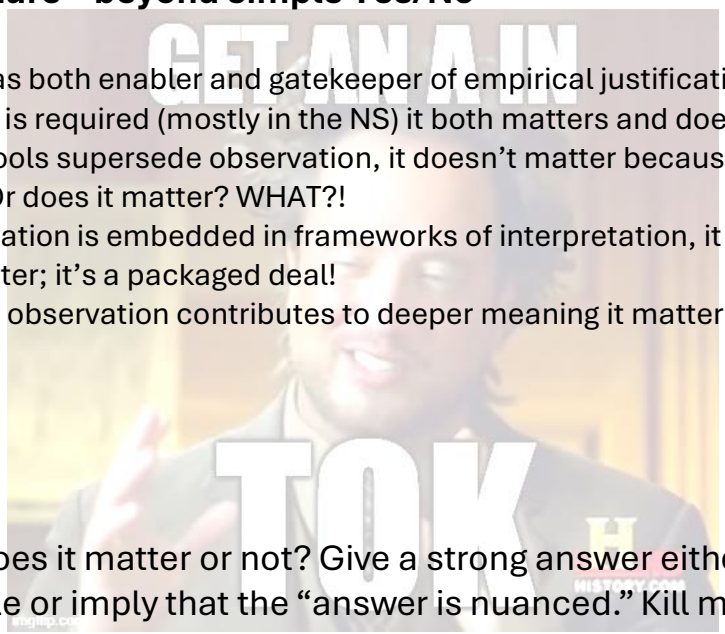
Sometimes, empiricism and observation isn't possible! How does that affect the discussion? But at other times, observation is the only way of gathering data (so it doesn't matter that it's flawed!). Both of these angles will be discussed by top scores.

Title #1 Organizational Structures

Yes/No Structure

1. Yes, it matters where observation must be accurate to maintain credibility
2. Yes, it matters where observation is inherently interpretative
3. No it does not matter where subjectivity is not a flaw but a feature
4. No, it does not matter where alternative tools reduce dependence on observation

Complex Structure – beyond simple Yes/No



1. Observation as both enabler and gatekeeper of empirical justification. Since observation is required (mostly in the NS) it both matters and doesn't.
2. When other tools supersede observation, it doesn't matter because observation is irrelevant. Or does it matter? WHAT?!
3. When observation is embedded in frameworks of interpretation, it matters and also doesn't matter; it's a packaged deal!
4. When flawed observation contributes to deeper meaning it matters, but in a good way!

Conclusion

Take a stand – does it matter or not? Give a strong answer either way – don't stay in the middle or imply that the "answer is nuanced." Kill me.

If it matters, what does this mean in the NS, where observation is important? If it doesn't matter, what does that mean for those who use other tools primarily? Give an implication or takeaway.

See my conclusions video here.

TOK Essay Title #2

To what extent do you agree that doubt is central to the pursuit of knowledge? Answer with reference to two areas of knowledge.

Title #2 Breakdown

I like this title a lot because there are so many different examples to focus on that can demonstrate doubt. As this document reflects my thoughts after about 24 hours, I really can't find a reason to disagree with this claim, can I? Isn't doubting something the reason that we try to find an answer? Though there is a lot of value in confirmation and replacability (especially in the sciences), I wouldn't say that these are the *central* reason why we pursue knowledge.

The word *central* is, well, ***CENTRAL*** to this title. Sorry. There are many things that are important and vital to the pursuit of konwledge, but the word *central* implies that it's in the middle of it all. It's required by all. It's involved in all knowledge pursuit (in one way or another). Don't get mixed up and think that this is asking if doubt is *involved* in the pursuit of konwledge. That's not what the title is asking. It's asking about whether or not it is *central,* which is something different. We can argue that doubt is always a part of the pursuit of knowledge, but that something else is central, or that it is only a supporting factor.

When discussing *central,* and thinking about the words above, I would hesitate to give a drawn out definition in the introduction (as many teachers require). This is a pretty simple word to understand and explore. Unless you are offering your own unique definition of the word (which may not even be apporpriate), a simple definition of the word is fine.

Similarly, there's really no reason to define *doubt*. Firstly, this is a common word. Everyone knows what it means. More impotantly, however, is that doubt can manifest in many different ways in the examples you'll explore. Limiting

yourself to one definition (or just ignoring your definition in the body paragraphs) is not ideal.

As always, this is a *To What Extent* title and question, which means that you are expected to find answers that go beyond a “yes/no” and instead exist on some sort of “central/not-central” spectrum. Every answer, body paragraph, and conclusion need to explicitly state the extent to which the evidence demonstrates that doubt is central to the pursuit of knowledge. When I mark a *TWE* title, the first thing that I do is ctrl+F and search for “extent.” It's surprising how in most examples this word appears less than 4 times.

Finally, what *is* the pursuit of knowledge? This phrase can encapsulate so many things in all AOKs. Can we really say that doubt is central in all pursuits, regardless of AOK and context? OK. I just disagreed with myself.

Title #2 Sample Organizational Structures

Agree/Disagree Structure

Agree to a strong extent

1. AOKs that rely on falsification and skepticism demonstrate agreement, as doubt drives the creation of hypothesis, peer review, and replication.
2. In AOKs that demonstrate continual growth, doubt is constantly fueling improvements on past theories, especially older ones. This demonstrates agreement to a strong extent.

Disagree to a strong extent

3. In AOKs in which certainty is more valued (and attainable), doubt may eventually disappear from certain theories, axioms, or problems. This directly disagrees with the previous point and disagreement to a strong extent.
4. In similar AOKs, doubt is involved in knowledge-pursuit, but material tools, community involvement, access to previous knowledge, or other soft tools are central instead. It's an overreach to say that doubt is central in *all* knowledge pursuits, as this depends on the context and AOK.

Complex Structure – beyond simple Yes/No

The question "to what extent" can be answered in so many ways. This outline goes beyond "strong" or "no" extent and finds nuanced answers in the middle. Haha. Nuanced. This outline may use words like "considerable, limited, extensive, mixed, or moderate" for example when describing the extent of agreement.

1. <u>Considerable Extent</u> – The sciences use doubt as their central factor, but it is not used alone. Instead, it's a part of a framework that holds the sciences together. It is not doubt on its own, but rather doubt as the central factor that coordinates other, important factors.
2. <u>Moderate Extent –</u> Doubt can be useful in AOKs like History and the Arts, but it can also be harmful and misguiding. Can something be described as *central* if it causes harm, misinformation, and falsehoods?
3. <u>Minimal Extent</u> – In Maths, and to some extent History and NS, when truth is found, doubt is not valued at all. In some cases, people who doubt could be considered heretics, quacks, or pseudoscientific! Doubt may be central in knowledge production and confirmation, but after this is done, it's not central anymore in certain topics, fields, and disciplines.
4. <u>Mixed Extent –</u> In studying societies, religions, and cultural beliefs, if the WOK of faith is being used by those that are studied, doubt may not be of much use, as the

knowledge claims being tested cannot be proven empirically. So what is the purpose of doubt? Understanding would be more important here.

Conclusion

Similar to Title #1, come to a firm answer here: *I agree to X extent* should be somewhere in the first sentence of your conclusion. A memorable conclusion here could offer the Personal Approach, which takes the things that you've learned and applies them to your own interests, experiences, or studies.

See my conclusions video here.

TOK Essay Title #3

Is the power of knowledge determined by the way in which the knowledge is conveyed? Discuss with reference to mathematics and one other area of knowledge.

Title #3 Breakdown

Unlike the previous titles, which may prompt the defining of super obvious terms, the phrase *power of knowledge* is quite vague and open to interpretation. There are two ways to go here:

1. You can provide one definition, and hold all examples to this definition.
2. You can acknowledge the broadness of the phrase and show different ways that knowledge can have power (preferred by examiners).

Regardless of which approach you take, make sure that you follow this route for the entire essay. Sadly, the most common route is to offer a single definition in the introduction and then forget about it in the very next paragraph. Oof.

When it comes to how knowledge is *conveyed*, I would recommend against defining this at all. This *always* looks different, so a single definition is not appropriate here.

This title, like many others from past years, is a Yes/No question. That means, at a minimum, each example should offer a *yes* or a *no* (and this should be identified in the topic sentence and closing sentence of each body paragraph). But with that said, top scores will go beyond a one-word answer. See the sample structures for more on this, but remember: if you want an A, crafting a paragraph that says *yes,* and then just telling me that the example demonstrates a *yes* is insufficient. Elaboration and analysis is always required.

To go beyond a Yes/No answer, consider elaborating on *why*. Why, in this example or instance, was the power of knowledge dependent on the way in

which it was conveyed? Is this *why* always the case? Or was it a unique example? What lessons can we learn about conveying a piece of knowledge from this example if we want to communicate our knowledge in the future? This can also work for a great conclusion.

Title #3 Sample Organizational Structures

Yes/No Structure

Yes

1. Mathematical language is universal, and facilitates universal application and application. This is only applicable for Maths, though some discipline-specific language and notation could also work with this (Italian in music, for example).
2. With a connection to the previous point, an understanding of the language or AOK is required for knowledge to become powerful. All AOKs have times in which knowledge was conveyed, but misunderstood by those with less knowledge. Clear communication, a stout reputation, and messages that are understood all affect the way that knowledge can become accepted and, thus, powerful.

No

1. Some knowledge is inherently powerful. To contrast with the second point above, some knowledge, such as mathematical truth, universally accepted aesthetics, or scientific laws and axioms do not depend on the manner in which they are conveyed. They are true because they are true, and the power is derived from this.
2. Poorly written documents in virtually all AOKs have power, regardless of how they are communicated. And well-written documents (whether it be a papyrus, report, or novel) don't necessarily do a better job of allowing their truths to become powerful. Does the power of Herodatus' histories depend on them being well written? Nope. They're completely biased and we appreciate that about them.

Complex Structure – beyond simple Yes/No

1. <u>Yes, but it requires a base-level of knowledge.</u> Though mathematical (and other discipline-specific) notation *does* create universal understanding (as mentioned above), this universality is for mathematicians, not everyone. Students and non-experts may depend on the way in which knowledge is conveyed.
2. <u>No, but it requires a third party.</u> A lot of knowledge, one understood, can become powerful through interpretation or application at a later date. The knowledge may initially be less powerful because it was conveyed poorly, but it doesn't *stay* unpowerful.
3. <u>Yes, but what is power *anyway?*</u> Though *power* could usually be considered to be application or impact, we could define power in one instance as validity. Something is powerful simply because it's true. In this sense, it doesn't matter how it's conveyed. If it's true, it has power.
4. <u>No, because individual interpretation determines the power of a piece of knowledge/knowledge claim.</u> Some examples of knowledge are not powerful in and of themselves, nor are they universally powerful. Instead, a piece of knowledge may be powerful because of how someone understands or applies it.

Conclusion

There are many directions to go here. Make sure to avoid Emerson's (and Mortal Kombat's) cliché *There is no knowledge that is not power.* Instead, try to explore what this teaches us about the act of communication in general. Additionally, what insights are gained about the nature of power?

Finally, as you are a student who learned a lot for this essay, and your job is to *convey knowledge* in this essay, how has this research affected the way that you have written this?????? You're welcome.

See my conclusions video here.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TOK Essay Title #4

In the acquisition of knowledge, can we only understand something to the extent that we understand its context? Discuss with reference to two areas of knowledge.

Title #4 Breakdown

This title is, like the previous one, a Yes/No title. So, you must, at minimum, declare whether each example demonstrates a *yes* or a *no*. Then, your conclusion should ultimately take a stand and give a clear answer either way. It can have a *yet* or a *but,* but avoid answers that stay in the middle. This lets you stand out.

If you're looking to stand out, I'd choose this title. I don't expect it to be very popular, as finding evidence for this one will be challenging. You will need to find RLE's of people demonstrating a limited understanding of something *solely* due to their lack of contextual understanding. Honestly, I don't even want to write about this one anymore. But I will. Because I got your back.

There could be some overlap here with Title #3, as context may play a factor in the power of knowledge rather than the manner in which it is conveyed.

One key word that should affect every answer (and especially your conclusion) is the inclusion of *only*. This is important, as it implies that the answer is black and white. It's either a yes or a no, with nothing in between. When this happens, I always advise students to quickly say that the answer is not yes, as *only* implies that there are no exceptions. Then explore the in-between with your body paragraphs.

It's interesting that this title asks only about if one can *understand* something. Not count it as knowledge, use this knowledge, or something else. This can shape the examples that you use.

I have been teaching TOK for over a decade, and nearly every essay can work best with NS, HS and the Arts. This title really lends itself well to History, which is not often the case for most titles. Just make sure that you remember that the AOK of history is focused on *how* we learn about the past. It’s not just a recollection of events from the past. It’s about producing knowledge.

Title #4 Sample Organizational Structures

Yes/No Structure

Complex Structure – beyond simple Yes/No

Yes

1. In History, knowledge doesn't exist outside of context. There are no facts that sit in a void and can be inherently true (as in Maths). This is a great example that agrees with the *only* aspect of the title.
2. In some AOKs, understanding knowledge claims is affected by how well the *historical* context of the individual knowledge-producer is understood. This is especially true in HS and the Arts, but also true in other AOKs. Think about scientific claims made without certain tools, or works of art produced in a temporal context.

No

1. In Maths and the sciences, a contextual understanding of many facts is not required. We don't need to know Pythagoras to understand his theorem. I understood gravity without needing to know who Newton was. Don't use these example, of course, but you get what I mean. This could also be true in the Arts and could be a complete disagreement with art that requires contextual understanding. Some aesthetic beliefs are universal, aren't they?
2. Some phenomena in the sciences appear throughout contexts. We may study something and come to an understanding of it despite it existing in other contexts that we know less. Going back to a simple concept, gravity, we can understand the concept without understanding how it manifests in different contexts.

Conclusion

You're really needing to come to a decision here regarding if context is *always required*. The answer, as you should say in your introduction, is that it is not. Therefore, how often is it required? Is it very important, but not the only thing that matters? Come to this conclusion, and then apply it to your own learning in a class that you enjoy.

See my conclusions video here.

TOK Essay Title #5

To what extent do you agree with the claim that "all things are numbers" (Pythagoras)? Answer with reference to the arts and the human sciences.

Title #5 Breakdown

Every year has the *weird* title, and this is it for M26. But the thing is, it's actually kind of fun, isn't it? Or maybe it's stupid. I don't know. What is most interesting about this title is that it doesn't require maths. That alone will make it a popular one. But because it requires Arts and HS, the two most popular AOKs chosen each year, I can see this being one of the most popular titles.

Some really helpful information on the quote. Let's look at its context. First, look at what Bertrand Russell said in order to better understand what Pythagoras meant:

> *"Pythagoras, as everyone knows, said that 'all things are numbers'. This statement, interpreted in a modern way, is logically nonsense, but what he meant was not exactly nonsense. He discovered the importance of numbers in music, and the connection which he established between music and arithmetic survives in the mathematical terms 'harmonic mean' and 'harmonic progression'. He thought of numbers as shapes, as they appear on dice or playing cards. We still speak of squares and cubes of numbers, which are terms that we owe to him. He also spoke of oblong numbers, triangular numbers, pyramidal numbers, and so on. These were the numbers of pebbles (or, as we should more naturally say, shot) required to make the shapes in question. He presumably thought of the world as atomic, and of bodies as built up of molecules composed of atoms arranged in various shapes. In this way he hoped to make arithmetic the fundamental study in physics as in aesthetics."*

You can download this book for free here. The quote appears and is explained more on page 35.

We can learn more about Pythagoras and his beliefs in this document, which is just plain silly. And amazing.

Essentially, the quote in Greek, ἐν τῷ ἀριθμῷ δέ τε τὰ παντ\' ἐπέοικε directly translates to “everything fits in the number.” This fits with what Pythagorists believed, which was essentially that numbers were the building block, or atoms, of the universe. Yup. And now you learn about this guy in middle school.

While it’s important to probably treat this quote as hyperbole, it’s also important to know that he was not being hyperbolic. So how do you want to treat this? Are you going to take his metaphysical claim head on? Or are you going to find numbers symbolically in each “thing.”

As with other TWE prompts, remember that every point, and especially your conclusion, needs to state the extent to which you agree. Remember to ctrl+F for the words *extent* and *agree/disagree* as you draft.

Finally, feel free to be specific in what “all things” means in the scope of your essay. You can narrow this down a bit.

Title #5 Sample Organizational Structures

Yes/No Structure

Yes

1. In the sciences, like in Maths, things that can be explained numerically (quantifiable data) are considered the most certain. This is opposed to qualitative data which may be convincing, but is rarely considered certain or all-encompassing.
2. Numerical forms exist throughout non-mathematical systems and AOKs. Music theory is built on numbers, and the Fibonacci sequence is seen in both art and nature.

No

1. The arts are special because they are the only AOK that express what cannot be expressed; subjectivity and disagreement are inherent to this AOK.
2. Human behavior is dynamic, not static. What is true about human behavior at one point will most likely not be true at another point. This is why the HS continue to be re-evaluated and shaped over time.

Complex Structure – beyond simple Yes/No

<u>Agree to a moderate extent</u> – While numbers can explain the function of a work of art (such as how a song sounds happy or sad), that does not explain the intent, the purpose, or the effect. Numbers make up some things, but not all.

<u>Agree to a partial extent</u> – Qualitative and Quantitative data often create the most certainty when working hand-in-hand. Neither can give the full story. Numbers, while helpful at identifying patters, for example, do not explain human behavior. Think about numerical representation of human behavior (charts, graphs, etc).

<u>Disagree to a strong extent</u> – Art can be made for any purpose, even the purpose of not being quantifiable. What artworks are created for the sake of not being explainable or understandable? This rejects the "all" of the central claim, here.

<u>Disagree to a strong extent, but…</u> – In both AOKs, emotion is non-binary; it exists on a spectrum. Hmm. I may want to reword that. There's not a way that we could say that numbers make up emotions, as these differ between all people. Numbers may be used to generalize, sure, but it wouldn't make up all things. With that said, emotions are connected to neurological signals and chemical reactions, which can be explained through maths. So what do we know?!

Conclusion

The conclusion here needs to go big. Because Pythagoras was speaking big. While I think that most of us will reject the idea that the foundational aspects of the universe are numbers, what *can* we say about how math is very prevalent in the universe? Watch this to be even more confused.

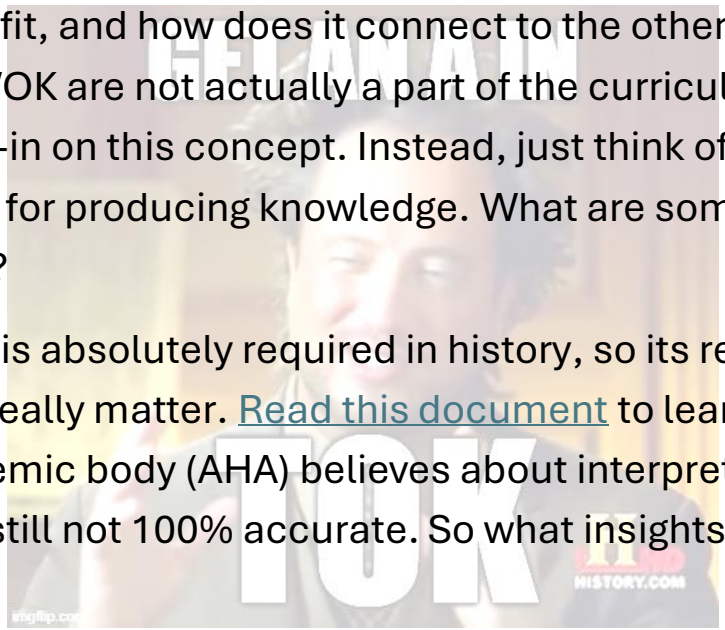
See my conclusions video here.

TOK Essay Title #6

To what extent is interpretation a reliable tool in the production of knowledge? Answer with reference to history and one other area of knowledge.

Title #6 Breakdown

This title is so similar to Title #1 that I thought I was losing my mind for a second. Yeah. I was working on this late. But with that said, this is asking us to think about interpretation as another unofficial WOK. Where does it fit, and how does it connect to the other official ones? Remember, WOK are not actually a part of the curriculum anymore, so don't go all-in on this concept. Instead, just think of all WOK as different tools for producing knowledge. What are some others we haven't listed?



Interpretation is absolutely required in history, so its reliability doesn't even really matter. Read this document to learn more about what an academic body (AHA) believes about interpretation. It's required, but still not 100% accurate. So what insights can that teach us?

Again, this is a TWE. This leads us to a very easy conclusion. You want to tell me that it is reliable to X extent. Go beyond *some* or *most*. Tell me the extent to which it should be used and trusted. Or define a rule: interpretation should be considered reliable under these circumstances.

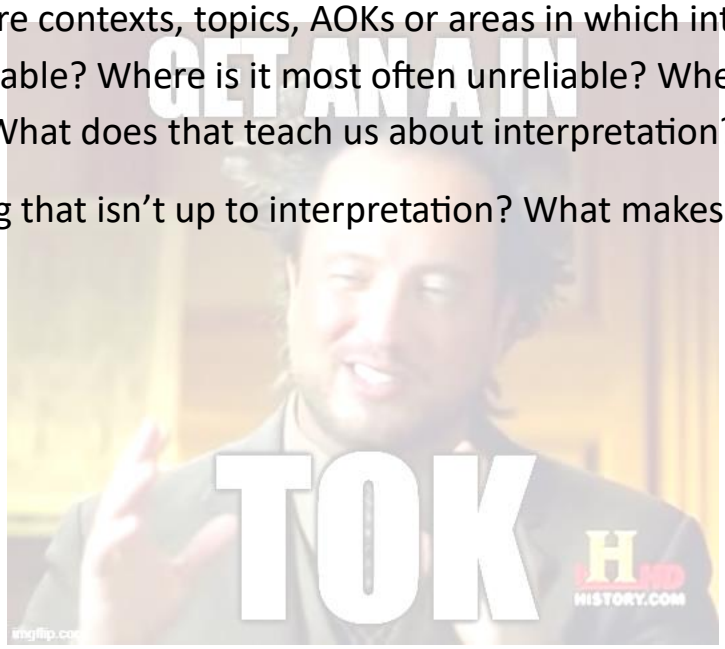
This requires history! That's going to screw a lot of students who mistake events that happened in the past for something involved in the AOK of history. Here is what it means to analyze the AOK of history, straight from the TOK Gods (IB Examiner Report May 2024):

[Studying the AOK of history is to study] work of historians in the production of knowledge of the past - instead of merely referring to the past events but not associating them with the work involved in coming to know or understand the event. So how does interpretation come into play here?

Some ~~stupid~~ teachers will require you to define *reliable* because they just love reading definitions and require them in every introduction. I wouldn't do this, as you can demonstrate how reliable means different things in different examples and AOKs.

As you write, think about what interpretation does well, and what it doesn't do well. Are there contexts, topics, AOKs or areas in which interpretation is more or less reliable? Where is it most often unreliable? Where is it most often reliable? What does that teach us about interpretation?

Is there anything that isn't up to interpretation? What makes it this way?



Title #6 Sample Organizational Structures

High/Low Structure

High

1. Interpretation is a reliable tool in history because it does not operate independently. Look at the AHA guidelines to see how proper academic interpretation works in this AOK. Remember, we're focusing on experts here, so this guideline is really gospel.
2. Though interpretation can be subjective, there are varying degrees of correctness in the act of interpretation. Interpreting a film doesn't mean making up anything you want. In the same way, interpreting data gives you guidelines and direction as well.

Low

1. Some data and knowledge does not require interpretation at all (specifically mathematical and scientific data that uses numbers). Interpretation may be reliable in *some* contexts, but in others it is not as reliable as axiomatic or empirical knowledge. It may be reliable in some contexts, but not others.
2. In the sciences, interpretation has often led to confirmation bias, contextually (or temporal) bias, observational error or other things. Interpretation is not reliable here because it introduces a variable (the observer) in something that may not have any other variables.

Complex Structure – beyond simple Yes/No

Conclusion

One thing that came to mind is that it may not matter how accurate interpretation is, because in many cases it is the only tool that we have for producing knowledge. That's not a main point, of course, but rather a takeaway. I learned X and it caused me to think that it didn't really matter at all. This is an example of a discussion of the implications of your learning.

See my conclusions video here.