



Get an A in TOK – Title #1 Research Guide

May 2027

Welcome to the research.

You picked Title #1. Or you're thinking about it, which is the same thing. Fair warning: it's going to be the most popular title of the year, which means your examiner is going to read a lot of these, which means your examples have to be better than everyone else's.

That's what this is. Eight real cases, four for **the Arts** and four for **History**, each with a breakdown of what actually happened and at least one link so you can go read the real thing instead of my summary of it. No conclusions. That part is yours.

Two things this document is not. It's not an essay. And it's not a list you can drop in without opening the links; if you cite a source you never read, your examiner will know. They always know.



When you're done with Claude, Google, and those other guys who sell your essays, you're going to want some one-on-one help. [Click here to schedule a Zoom tutoring session with me](#). This is what everyone wants.

Brand new this year – TOK Research Lab: it's basically my brain put into digital form. Search, chat, and interact with all of my work – a decade of examples, teaching and TOK stuff – but just for you! [Click here](#) to join!

Need to send me your essay instead? [Click here](#) to get feedback, suggestions, and help added into your essay. It's probably not an A now. But it can be soon!

Wanna see full sample essays? Of course you do. I'll be producing multiple exemplar essays packs this year on my website, so [click here](#) to find each pack.

Need outlines? Grab the [free download packet](#). Guides, examples, and sample outlines, all free.

Title #1

Do we gain a better appreciation of the human experience from the artist or the historian? Discuss with reference to the arts and history.

Both AOKs are picked for you. That means the whole essay lives or dies on your examples and on what you decide *appreciation* and *better* actually mean. Everything below is a real case. Each one has at least one link so you can go read the actual thing, not just my summary of it. Pick the ones that make you argue with yourself.

The Arts

I'm actually suggesting Picasso...

Using Guernica is kind of something I stay away from, but it really works for this – something that we can study as arts and history. Picasso read about the bombing while in Paris a few days later and, within about five weeks, painted a 25-foot mural for the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris World's Fair.

Here's the strange part: there are no planes in the painting. No bombs, no Germans, nothing that says "Guernica." It's become iconic for the bombing, but is also not specific to the event without a lot of color. Maybe by being less flashy it becomes easier for helping to connect to the human experience.

Bonus twist to chew on: the artist's non-factual painting only exists because a journalist's factual account got to him first. This is a good contrast to a work of history because it's not telling us *about* the event; it's telling us about something more human.

Human Experience: First, there's the obvious one: we can gain the understanding of the suffering of others. The human experience includes suffering, and this communicates it in a different way. More interestingly, though, art also facilitates the connection between humans. Maybe part of the human experience is the way that we can empathize with each other through different mediums. The human experience is shared experience.

Start with the Reina Sofía museum's [Rethinking Guernica project](#) (they hold the painting and have put up about 2,000 documents about it). [Smarthistory has a clear walkthrough](#) of what's in the image. And [here's Steer's original report](#) so you can compare the two directly.

You can also contrast this with works of historians, as well! [Here's one database](#) of historical work. And here's some [original source documents](#)!

How much of the human experience is explored in a lie?

Migrant Mother is one of the most iconic American photos and depicts a mother during the great depression. The [Library of Congress research guide](#) has the photographer's work and shares the story behind it. More importantly, we actually don't know that much about the woman or the photograph. But it absolutely explores the human condition.

But then it gets weird – the woman may not have been affected much by the depression, and she said that she felt exploited. Many people feel like it helps us empathize and understand the human suffering (human experience), but if it's based on a lie, do we really?

Maybe the human experience isn't reliant on one human? Idk

Which helps us appreciate the human condition better: the photograph or the historian's work? See the links below:

The [Library of Congress research guide](#) has Lange's account. [Smarthistory covers the image](#) as a work of art, and [this History.com piece](#) tells Thompson's side.

What about a true lie?

One of my favorite books (and one often taught in IB) is Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. He was a soldier in the Vietnam war, but the book is a novel. The brilliance of the book is how he makes things up, deliberately confuses the reader, and blends fact and fiction. If true, this book is a work of the AOK of History, as it would be a primary source. But as it is fiction, it's a work of art. But how much of one's own feelings are fiction?

The [NEA Big Read page](#) is a good overview. Listen to [O'Brien on NPR's Fresh Air](#) explaining why he did it this way, or read [this lecture he gave at Brown University](#).

"Great Theater and Bad History"

Is *Hamilton* "bad history"? That's what some say it could be. In using black and brown actors, it actually ignores the minorities inside of the Hamilton story. And it embellishes a lot about the slavery issue, which was very minor. So what is the role of art that explicitly is discussing history? How does this share some *amazing* things about the human experience?

Similar to Guernica and the photo, how much of something has to be true in order to successfully engage with us and connect us to the human experience?

The final song in *Hamilton* is all about legacy and talks about telling a story. These are things that all of us share. But does truth even matter?

[Smithsonian Magazine summarizes the debate](#), and [historian Lyra Monteiro's response](#) to her critics is short and readable.

History

The Historian Who Won the Nobel Prize... for Literature

Svetlana Alexievich was given the Nobel Prize for Literature, despite gathering data as a historian! She interviewed hundreds of Soviet women, mothers of soldiers, and mothers of people who died in tragic ways. Then she arranged the interviews into a different form that was considered to be literature (by some). The Swedish Academy noted her “her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time,” and called her work “a history of emotions.” This is a great phrase here!

Important: all Historians interpret the knowledge that they find. But Alexievich deliberately, and openly, edits the form and the interviews – it is not a book of transcripts. And in 1993, she was sued by two women who she interviewed, who said that she made up what was printed. Is this history? Art? Something in between?

As she engaged in historical methods, we can treat this as art, but we want to look at how she explored the human condition, and why interviews specifically are noteworthy.

Start at [NobelPrize.org](https://www.nobelprize.org). [JSTOR Daily has a good short piece](#) that covers her method and the lawsuit, and [Britannica](#) calls her an “oral historian” in the first paragraph, which is kind of the whole debate in two words. [This article](#) explains the controversy.

Are all facts biased?

When we look at most sources of ancient history, we understand that the sources are biased. You can use nearly any Roman or Greek historian, so I chose Josephus. Josephus’ *The Jewish War* is a classic and widely studied text for historians. But there is debate on how much it should be relied on.

I chose this because it’s not looking at something that is in the middle of Arts and History. Instead, how do we connect something to the human experience that is attempting to tell us just straight up facts, but also in a way that we know is subjective?

Here is an [essay](#) about using Josephus by Historian Steve Mason. This approach can be applied to nearly any ancient source, however. Here’s another [article](#) about Josephus’ credibility.

Ordinary men that also kill people

Historians Christopher Browning and Daniel J. Goldhagen studied the same primary sources to learn about “normal” Nazi’s that were doing typical Nazi things. But they both came up with really different takeaways and justifications for the behaviors. If two historians can apply the same approach and come to different interpretations, how does that affect how historians successfully explore the human condition?

Browning found that these were “ordinary men” who got caught up by the German Nazi mentality. Goldhagen looked at the sources and found that these guys were killers.

This [article](#) breaks it down well. Here’s an [interview](#) with Browning. Here’s a way to [access the book](#), make sure that you read some of it!

The Cambridge Historian Who Made Up Conversations on Purpose

John Hatcher’s *The Black Death: A Personal History* did something historians aren’t supposed to do: he wrote scenes. Conversations. Feelings. You know...fiction. He writes about things that really happened, but what the people say to each other is invented.

Hatcher calls the book a “literary docudrama rather than conventional history” and explains in the preface that after decades on the data he still couldn’t tell readers what the plague felt like to live through.

Here, a historian says that he needs an artistic tool to explore the human experience.

[This journal article](#) quotes Hatcher’s preface directly and explains how the book works. [Publishers Weekly’s review](#) gives you the quick version. This seems to have [most of the book](#) in it!

