

## Transition support document

A full teacher support material for the new theory of knowledge (TOK) course (first teaching 2020, first assessment 2022) will be published soon. In the interim, this transition document provides key information to help support teachers with the launch of the new course. It includes:

- a one-page overview detailing the top 10 changes in the new TOK course
- information about the new TOK exhibition internal assessment task
- two samples of student TOK exhibitions with examiner marks and comments.

Three free short eLearning resources on the new TOK course are also available for teachers to help support the transition to the new course.

These three 30 minute resources focus on key features such as the new knowledge and technology optional theme, and can be accessed via this link <https://www.ibo.org/professional-development/free-learning/dp-pd-learning-resources/>

## Top 10 changes in TOK course

1. New core theme on “knowledge and the knower”.

This is an opportunity for students to reflect on themselves as knowers and thinkers. It is designed to have strong links to the IB learner profile and the aims of the Diploma Programme (DP) core, helping to make the course feel more approachable, engaging and relevant to 16-year-old students.

2. New themes on “knowledge and technology” and “Knowledge and politics”.

This is designed to provide more space for conversations about topical issues such as fake news and social media “filter bubbles”.

3. Streamlining of terminology.

The term “ways of knowing” and the distinction between “shared” and “personal” knowledge have been removed. The aim is to avoid having a lot of TOK-specific vocabulary and to avoid abstract, decontextualized or philosophical discussions of the nature of perception.

4. Greater clarity about the nature of the subject and what is expected from teachers.

There is often some confusion or division of opinion over the nature of TOK. The new guide tries to clarify expectations of what the IB is looking for and help teachers be clearer on what key areas need to be addressed.

5. Shift from formulating knowledge questions to exploring or discussing knowledge questions.

This is a moving away from the formulation of knowledge questions in the assessment tasks to focus instead on exploring or discussing knowledge questions that are provided for students for the assessment tasks. Many examples of knowledge questions are provided for teachers throughout the guide.

6. Compulsory engagement with ethics.

This is a shift from having ethics as a standalone optional area of knowledge to having ethics as a requirement within every part of the course. This makes ethics compulsory for all students.

7. Five compulsory areas of knowledge, including making the arts compulsory for all students.

This is a shift from having a choice of areas of knowledge to having five compulsory areas of knowledge. This allows the essay titles to refer to specific areas of knowledge; ensures that all students engage with the arts, mathematics, history, human sciences and natural sciences—areas that they should already be familiar with from their pre-DP studies.

8. Completely new internal assessment (IA) task and new moderation process.

There is now a TOK exhibition which is focused on showing how TOK manifests in the real world and shows the real-world relevance of TOK. This replaces the current IA with an entirely new task and provides opportunities for schools to do interesting exhibition activities that help raise the profile of TOK in the school.

9. Clearer and more accessible essay titles.

This means titles that are still challenging to answer but are more accessible as questions in how they are worded. All titles are framed as knowledge questions rather than requiring students to formulate knowledge questions related to the title.

10. Clearer essay focus and assessment instrument.

There is a focus on areas of knowledge only rather than a mix of all aspects of course. This is to try to make expectations clearer. There is clearer instrument wording; the key underpinning question has changed from: “does the student present a cogent analysis of knowledge questions related to the title?” to: “does the student provide a clear, critical and coherent exploration of the essay title?”.

## The TOK exhibition

The TOK exhibition focuses on exploring how TOK manifests in the world around us. Students are required to select one prompt from the list of 35 internal assessment prompts provided in the TOK subject guide. They then curate an exhibition of three objects connected to their chosen prompt.

An extremely wide variety of different types of objects are suitable for use in a TOK exhibition. Students are encouraged to select objects that have personal relevance or that link to areas of personal interest. For example, a student with an interest in fantasy football might select an object such as a set of fantasy football rankings or a set of football statistics, or a student might choose to include a personal item such as a photograph of a grandparent.

The student may have created the objects themselves, but they must be pre-existing objects rather than ones created specifically for the purposes of the exhibition. The objects may also be digital rather than physical. For example, students could include a photograph of an object where it would not be practical or possible for them to exhibit the physical object. Students may also use digital objects, such as a post on social media.

However, what is really important for this task is that the students select objects that have a specific real-world context—objects that exist in a particular time and place, including virtual spaces. For example, a photograph of a student’s childhood teddy bear is an example of an object that has a specific real-world context, whereas a generic image of “a teddy bear” from an internet search is not.



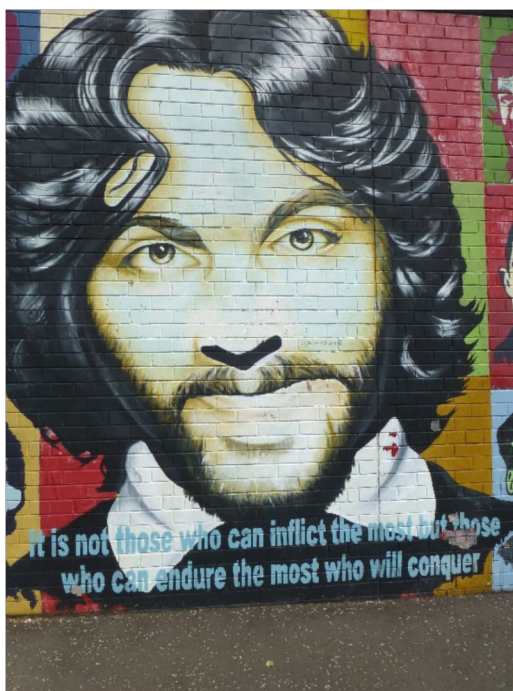
### Figure 1

*An example of three physical objects used in a TOK exhibition*



### Figure 2

*An example of three physical objects used in a TOK exhibition*



**Figure 3**

*Examples of three photographs used in a TOK exhibition*

It is recommended that students base their exhibition on one of the themes, either the core theme or one of the optional themes. This can help students to select their prompt and to narrow down their choice of potential objects, helping them to find a starting point for what can otherwise be a very open task with a vast number of possible approaches.

It should be noted that there are a number of different, and equally valid, entry points into the TOK exhibition. Students may begin by being drawn to a particular theme and prompt, and then find objects that exemplify how that question manifests in the world around them. Alternatively, a student may begin with an object of particular interest and then decide which prompt provides an interesting TOK lens through which to think about that object.

One useful strategy can be to encourage students to take an exploratory approach where they play around with different prompts and objects before making their final selections. However students choose to



approach the task, they must ensure that their exhibition is based on just one internal assessment prompt and all three objects must be linked to this one same prompt.

## **The format of the exhibition**

All students must be given the opportunity to present or showcase their exhibition to an audience. As this does not form part of the formal assessment task, teachers have a great deal of flexibility as to how they choose to hold these exhibitions.

### **Ten examples of TOK exhibition formats**

1. A class of TOK students could hold an exhibition within one of their regular TOK classes.
2. A school could host a TOK exhibition evening for parents and other members of the school community.
3. A school could host a TOK exhibition event where students present to a panel of visitors from the local community.
4. A class of TOK students could host an exhibition for younger students, for example, prospective DP students in the school.
5. A school could host a combined event celebrating the Primary Years Programme (PYP) exhibition, the Middle Years Programme (MYP) personal project and the TOK exhibition.
6. A school could host a combined “DP core” event where students discuss their TOK exhibition, CAS experiences and extended essay research question.
7. Two classes of TOK students in the same school, or different nearby schools, could host exhibitions for each other to visit.
8. Students could display their TOK exhibitions in a “virtual exhibition”—by using an online gallery space.
9. Students could display their TOK exhibitions in a central public place within the school, such as the library or entrance foyer, to help raise the profile of TOK within the school.
10. Students could hold a TOK exhibition where teachers of other DP subjects are the audience and discuss the exhibitions with the students.



Figure 4

*An example of a TOK exhibition event*





**Figure 5**  
An example of a TOK exhibition event



**Figure 6**  
An example of a TOK exhibition event



**Figure 7**  
An example of a TOK exhibition undertaken within a TOK lesson

# Student exhibition: Example A

## TOK exhibition: Subtext and Connotation

The TOK prompt I have selected is: **“What challenges are raised by the dissemination and/or communication of knowledge?”**. This exhibition explores this prompt by reflecting on knowledge and language, and more specifically on whether subtext and connotation always create confusion rather than help us to communicate knowledge. The language we use in our everyday lives can often be interpreted many different ways by different people, depending on their cultural background, beliefs, ideologies, affiliations, personal experiences etc. In particular it seems that subtext and connotation can be particularly challenging as they are often only recognised by people that share some particular knowledge or experiences, and it seems that they can easily be interpreted very differently by different people which can cause confusion and hinder communication of knowledge.

### Object 1. Starbucks holiday cup



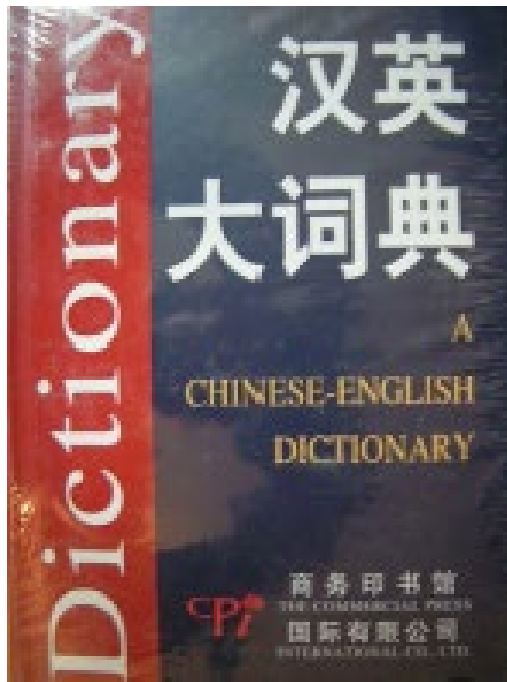
This cup was used by Starbucks in 2017 and was controversial because some people viewed the symbol of the two hands holding hands on the cup as a sign that Starbucks was promoting a homosexual agenda, because they saw the cups as having an LGBT subtext. However, many other people just saw the cup as spreading joy and love during the holiday season and did not think that there was any particular subtext at all.

This cup is particularly interesting for this exhibition because a Starbucks spokesman said that they had intentionally designed the cup so that customers could interpret it in their own way, which suggests that they were deliberately trying to communicate in an open or vague way rather than seeing the disagreement this might cause as being negative/ a challenge. In this way, the cup highlights how confusion arising from the use of subtext can be useful or can actually even be used by people intentionally to provoke discussion. The cup generated a lot of media attention for the company while still allowing them to say that how the cup was to be interpreted was up to their individual customers to decide.

This cup also enriches this exhibition because both some members of the LGBT community and also some members of the right-wing media and public saw the cups as promoting same sex relationships. While both of these different groups interpreted the cup this way, their reaction was very different, with one seeing this as very positive and one being very upset about it. Yet other people didn't see this subtext at all. So in this particular case it wasn't only that the subtext itself was only seen or understood by some groups and not others, but also that the reaction to that subtext also differed very dramatically.

### Object 2. My Chinese-English Translation Dictionary



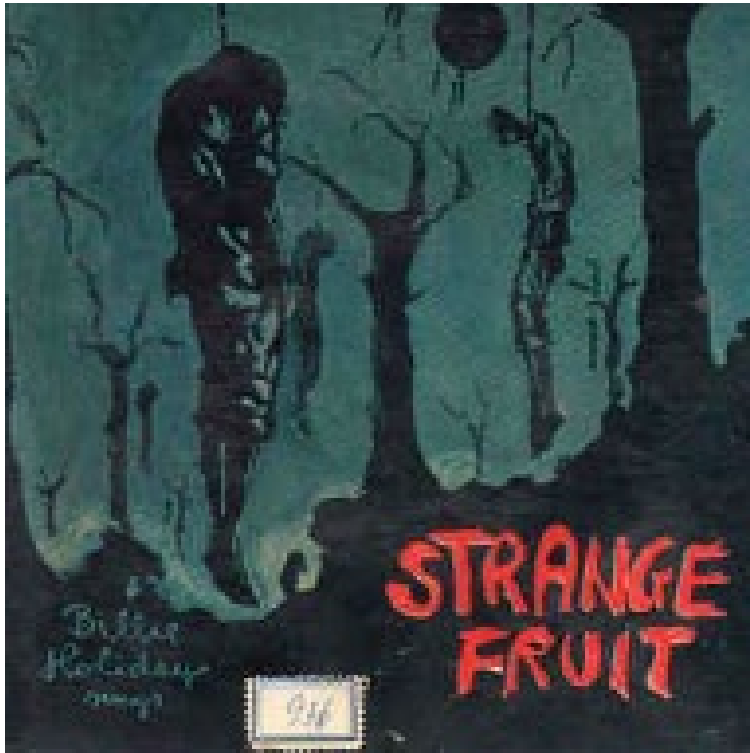


This object is a dictionary I use to help me translate between Chinese and English. When we think about how language is translated so that it can be communicated between people who speak different languages we can see that this poses many challenges to communication of knowledge, particularly because of the way that language uses connotations, euphemisms, proverbs and idioms that go beyond the literal meaning of a word.

The meaning and true essence behind many words and phrases is often unique to a specific language and the cultural/historical understanding that comes with an intimate knowledge only a native speaker can acquire, particularly things like connotation where language can have not only its literal translation but also can have secondary meanings.

This dictionary is therefore included in this exhibition as an example of where language and culture can really impact on communication of knowledge and on whether we see connotation or subtext at all as those nuances might be lost in translation. I have also included this dictionary in this exhibition because of how it represents me and the challenges around language and communication that I have personally experienced in my life and as a DP student – for example I have personally experienced how some words and ideas do not translate easily from Chinese into English.

### **Object 3. Billie Holiday's song *Strange Fruit***



The song *Strange Fruit* was sung by Billie Holiday in 1939. It is often seen to use vivid imagery to protest against the treatment of black people in America and to have a subtext about promoting civil rights. This can be seen to be heavily insinuated throughout the song, especially with the use of “strange fruit” as a gruesome metaphor for the lynching of black people.

This song makes us think about whether there are things that only some people see or understand because of their culture, personal experiences, etc. I do think that subtext and connotation are sometimes interpreted very differently by different groups and the group that a person belongs to impacts on the meaning and on what is being communicated. For example, *Strange Fruit* was sung by Billie Holiday, a black artist. The fact that this subtext was being expressed by a black artist means that the singer was themselves part of a group of people had been marginalised for so long, which makes the song lyrics even more powerful and emotional.

The use of metaphor, connotation and subtext in this song helps the song communicate complex emotions and themes about racism and civil rights. In this way, this song is a helpful addition to this exhibition because it provides a good contrast to the dictionary. The dictionary highlighted that subtext and connotation can sometimes cause confusion because they add a layer of interpretation to the literal meaning of language. But this song shows that sometimes subtext and connotation can actually help communicate complex ideas and emotions rather than always being a challenge to the communication of knowledge. Thinking about this song, I have realised that connotations and subtext don't always have to be challenging or misleading. If the person is trying to evoke a powerful meaning or emotion, often words that have many layered meanings deliver a more powerful impact.

## References

Sugar, R. 2018. 'How Starbucks's annual holiday cup became a battleground for the heart and soul of America', *Vox*, accessed online at <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/11/2/18052550/starbucks-holiday-cup-explained-2018-controversies>

Lynskey, D. 2011. 'Strange Fruit: the first great protest song', *The Guardian*, accessed online at <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/feb/16/protest-songs-billie-holiday-strange-fruit>

### Examiner comments

This is an example of an excellent exhibition. It was awarded a mark of 10/10.

The student has clearly identified three specific objects and has effectively linked each one to the selected prompt. There is also a strong justification for the selection of each object.

This student has included an introduction to their work. It should be noted that this is not required, but students are free to include a short introduction if they wish to do so. In this case the introduction is helpful as the student clearly identifies their selected prompt and theme, and also explains why they have focused particularly on issues around subtext and connotation. The student then goes on to make explicit references to the prompt throughout the response.

In their discussion of the third object, the student makes a comparison between the dictionary and the song. It should be noted that there is no requirement that students make connections or comparisons between their objects. They may choose to do so, but it is also perfectly acceptable to discuss each of the three objects entirely individually.

The piece of work should be judged holistically using the marking instrument, which means that, for example, the discussion of the dictionary should be rewarded wherever it appears in the response, not just where it appears under the section labelled object two.

## Student exhibition: Example B

### TOK exhibition

The guiding prompt to this inquiry is what constraints are there on the pursuit of knowledge?



This image, depicting the spinal cord of a dog, was used when announcing the decision of the US Department of Veterans Affairs to continue publically funding projects which involve research on dogs. The projects include parts of dogs' brains being removed, electrodes being attached to dogs' spinal cords and dogs being euthanised. They have been going on for decades, and have reportedly aided the invention and development of devices such as the cardiac pacemaker. Cardiac pacemakers are used by people suffering from arrhythmia, an irregular beating of the heart, and have saved human lives. This case raises the question of whether it is right to end the lives of test-subjects in the pursuit of knowledge which has the potential to save lives. It makes us think about the treatment of test subjects and the extent to which pain or disadvantages can be inflicted upon these until that treatment is seen as unethical and should be stopped.



The pursuit of knowledge is as old as mankind itself and has aided the development of all aspects of human life we know today. Knowledge has been pursued through research in all areas, yet this image shows that particular branches of research include the use of living test subjects - most frequently animals. The presence of these test subjects raises the central question of which is more important: the well-being of test subjects, or the gaining of new, potentially helpful knowledge? One can argue that no life is more valuable than another. Yet, to justify their treatment of test subjects, experimenters often compare the sacrifices made with the benefits gained. Whether success or breakthroughs made through experiments justify the treatment of test subjects remains an issue.

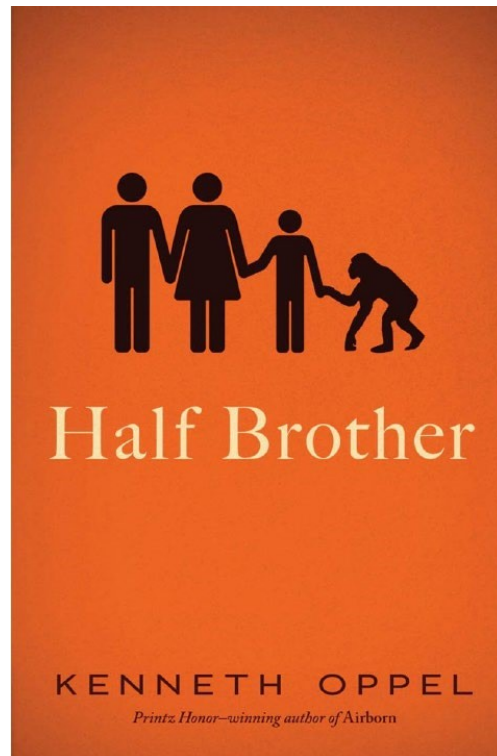


This is a map showing the approximate locations of all tribes known which have not been contacted by the rest of the world. Whether we should contact these peoples has been debated for a long time.

Through this contact, much, potentially new knowledge could be shared. We could help tribes develop their healthcare, sanitation and nourishment, and warn them of illegal loggers and climate change. Many argue, however, that if the tribes have survived until now without foreign contact, they can continue doing so, and that they have a right to be left alone.

We cannot assume things about the tribes: would they even want to meet us? The claim that the interference of the “white man” inevitably leads to the downfall of the indigenous tribe has also been raised. For example, the people in the tribes might not have immunity to diseases that people making contact with them have, and this could mean that making contact with them causes the tribe to get the disease and die out. This raises the question of whether it is right to contact a well-faring community without the guarantee that this interference will not end their peace and health.

The uncontacted tribes help expose the complexity of whether there should be constraints on the pursuit of knowledge. Any experiment involving human subjects requires a subject-signed participatory consent form. Consent can only be given by the tribes if they are contacted, but in this case, making contact is the thing you would want consent for, so that is not possible.



This image depicts the cover page of a fiction novel titled *Half Brother*, written by Canadian author Kenneth Oppel. In the story, a behavioural scientist and his family, wanting to research the language-learning capabilities of chimpanzees, raise an infant chimp as they would raise their own child. *Half Brother* plays out the consequences of such research in a fictional realm. Indeed, this is a key advantage of fictional works: the consequences of the treatment of test subjects can be mapped out and analysed wholly without having to deal with any unexpected, negative implications.

This case thus helps us understand the issues the relationship between experimenters and test-subjects. One of the main questions raised by this book is whether the action of raising a chimpanzee as a human child is right. Humans and chimpanzees might share 96% of their DNA, but the ways in which infants of the two species are raised are undisputedly different. The difficulty of finding an appropriate home for the chimp once the experiment is complete must also be considered - it would likely not be equipped to live in the wild. Whereas dogs (as seen in the first image) are clearly seen as animals, in this case, the line between animal and human becomes blurred. Apes, despite not being fully human, are seen as more human than any other species; the similarity between so many of their mannerisms and our own cannot help but have us hold them in higher regard than most other animals.

We see ourselves as a modern, forward-thinking society, and embrace all knowledge-gaining and -sharing opportunities. However, this book uses a fictional situation to help show different facets of the question of whether there should be any constraints on the pursuit of knowledge, and if so what they should be. It gives us a deeper understanding of the difficulty of coming to agreements regarding this issue.

#### Examiner comments

This is an example of a good exhibition. It was awarded a mark of 8/10.

A key strength of this exhibition is that it retains a focus on the prompt and on the constraints on the pursuit of knowledge, rather than, for example, presenting an ethical debate about the pros and cons of animal testing that loses sight of the prompt.