
TOK Essay Sample

TOPIC:
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
DESCRIBING AND EXPLAINING
SOMETHING



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TOK

The difference between describing and explaining something

Knowledge exists in all forms around mankind. It is man who resorts to different methods to get this knowledge. It is very crucial to gain knowledge in life since it is the one factor that differentiates human beings from animals. It really helps a person develop his brain and become sharper intellectually. That enables him to understand the world in a much better way so that he can make sense of things around him and can make sensible conversations with people.

Knowledge has existed from the beginning of times. There is no one specific way of gaining knowledge. It is acquired through education as well as through the experiences that a person gains throughout his life.

The title of this TOK mainly has to deal with how there exists a difference between describing something and offering an explanation for it. Before we plunge into exploring this title in further detail, it is best that we develop a key understanding of the key terms of this essay. Describing mainly entails giving a detailed account of something in words that are easy to understand so that the point gets across to the other person in the best way. Explaining something on the other hand means describing it further in order for even more clarity and to ensure that the other person has fully understood the point that is made. The TOK title suggests, "There is a sharp line between describing something and offering an explanation of it." The knowledge question that can be derived from this is that "is there a sharp line between describing something and offering an explanation of it." From my understanding, I feel that there definitely does exist a vast difference

in describing something and offering an explanation for it. The two terms have been used interchangeably for quite some time now but the fact of the matter is that they are essentially very different.

In order to be able to explain my point of view better, I will be using two areas of knowledge which are the natural sciences and the human sciences. I feel that I will better be able to explain my point of view by making use of these two areas of knowledge.

Moving on to the first area of knowledge, it can be seen that there are people who believe that the earth is flat. They are the ones who have come up with the flat earth theory. Their only reason to believe so is the fact that the surface of the earth 'feels' and 'looks' flat. From this, it can be seen that they don't have any other solid explanation for them to feel so, which is why for the longest time, proponents of the flat earth theory have not been able to convince people of their point of view. They did not give any reasons to clarify why they felt this way and that is why it has had a lot of people question these views (Wolchover). This is the one main reason that this belief was refuted to such a great extent and there were many groups of people that refuted it, till the actual theory came out to be that gave evidence about how the earth is spherical. This example very well shows that there is a vast difference between simply describing something and giving an in depth explanation for it. Had the proponents of the flat earth theory given different reasons why they felt this way, the chances of more people taking interest in what they were saying would have been much higher. They were simply 'describing' and not explaining.

A counterclaim to this can be seen in the gene theory which talks about how traits are passed on from the parents to the offspring. In this theory it can be seen that the concept works around chromosomes and DNA (Bailey). In order to make the general public understand this theory, it was simply described in words that are easy to understand but there were no specific reasons given so that this can be explained to the audience. From this example, it can be seen that there are certain circumstances in which there is a description and that is sufficient for the user to understand the scenario. But these circumstances or situations are few in number. On the whole, it can be concluded that there does exist a huge difference between simply describing something and offering an explanation for it. In order to make the other part understand one's point of view and actually develop interest in it, it is essential to explain the point of view. It allows for more clarity and it helps get the point across in a much better way.

As I move on to the next area of knowledge which is the human sciences, I will be shedding light on a sub section of this area of knowledge which is sociology. When Karl Marx gave his theory of class struggle, he explained the theory so that people would be able to understand his theory better. He talked about how the bourgeoisie exploited the proletariat for their own selfish means and how the only thing that mattered to them was their own personal gain. There are so many people in the world today who believe in Karl Marx's theory. The one major reason that they do this is because they understand and relate to what Karl Marx said in this theory. This is mainly due to the fact that Karl Marx was able to give reasons for believing in what he did. Karl Marx refers to the bourgeoisie as the 'oppressors' and the proletariat as the 'oppressed' (McCabe). In his theory he explained that the rich have personal gains from paying minimal wages to the

struggling class and that is how they were able to exploit them to their own advantage. From this example, it can be seen that Karl Marx was able to 'explain' his points in a really great way and that is why a lot of people believed in his ideas and his theories.

A counter claim to this is seen in the functionalist theory of sociology. This perspective states that all social institutions play a positive part in society and work towards building a society that is progressive (Anthony). There are people who believe this theory to be true but then there are a lot of people who criticize this theory as well. The main reason for this is the fact that this theory fails to take into account social change. Some people say that this theory is conservatively biased. This is mainly due to the fact that Emile Durkheim simply described this theory and did not 'explain' in detail how he felt this theory accounted for social change that takes place in the society. Had he explained this theory in more detail and given more reasons about why he believed that this theory did take into account social change, it wouldn't have received as much criticism as it did because there would have been people who would have seen this theory from the angle that he wanted them to. From this example, it can be seen that there really does exist a difference between describing something and offering an explanation for it.

The work of knowledge that I have used in these real-life situations in order to explain my point of view in a better way is reasoning. With theories like this, reasoning helps to see things from a different perspective and then form an opinion about them. In conclusion, it can be said that there definitely exists a sharp distinction between describing something and offering an explanation to it. When a person describes something, they simply state it in simpler words that make it easier

to comprehend, but when they offer an explanation for it, they make it a point to reason out to an extent that the other person understands them. They give different reasons for why they believe something to be true. There are situations where it is hard to distinguish between describing and explaining and that is why it is often seen that these terms are used interchangeably. But, when a person explains their points of view, the audience can comprehend the point of view in a much better way.

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