



# Theory of knowledge

## Understanding knowledge issues



# Understanding knowledge issues

This document is designed to clarify the term “knowledge issues”. This term is central to the theory of knowledge (TOK) course and its assessment. Students who can effectively identify and address knowledge issues will be at a significant advantage in assessment tasks.

Knowledge issues are issues **about** knowledge. They can apply to any aspect of knowledge and may refer to the acquisition, production, shaping, classification, status, and acceptance or rejection of knowledge. Knowledge issues range from the extremely general (“Can a fact exist without a context?”, “What constitutes good evidence?”) to the specific (“How can we distinguish between valid and invalid deductive arguments?”, “What should the role of emotion be in the justification of ethical decisions?”). Both extremes are appropriate focuses for TOK discussions and both can and should be explored in a TOK course. However, not all knowledge issues are equally appropriate for assessment purposes.

## Knowledge issues for assessment purposes

Students are required to address knowledge issues in both their essays and their presentations. In both cases it is helpful for students to be able to explore and analyse knowledge issues that will demonstrate their understanding. Given the vast range of knowledge issues that could be addressed, it is appropriate to offer guidance as to what types of knowledge issue are most likely to support high levels of achievement in both essays and presentations.

Knowledge issues that are most likely to support high levels of achievement are:

- open-ended questions that admit more than one possible answer
- explicitly **about** knowledge in itself and not subject-specific claims
- couched in terms of TOK vocabulary and concepts: the areas of knowledge, the ways of knowing and the concepts in the linking questions—belief, certainty, culture, evidence, experience, explanation, interpretation, intuition, justification, truth, values
- precise in terms of the relationships between these concepts

Note that these conditions are not formal requirements and that marks should always be awarded according to the criteria in the *Theory of knowledge guide* (March 2006). Experience suggests, however, that knowledge issues that satisfy these conditions are more likely to support success under the assessment criteria. It is important to clarify that although (for presentation purposes), “poor” knowledge issues may be relevant and so may attract credit under criterion A, they are unlikely to support the focused exploration and development required for the award of high marks under other criteria. The development of a “good” knowledge issue is, therefore, advisable for assessment purposes.

## Suggested use of tables

The tables below demonstrate a **progression** of knowledge issues. The tables could be discussed with students at an appropriate point, well into the TOK course, perhaps after students have explored several areas of knowledge and/or ways of knowing so that they fully grasp the ideas.

The five examples listed A–E below could be cut up into 25 cards and students could be asked to categorize the cards by topic and level of sophistication. After discussion, students could be asked to develop their own level descriptors. Examples F–I could then be shown and students asked to come up with suggestions to fill in the blanks. Students could also be asked to create progressions of their own.

Note how this goes from the specific to the general, moving from a visit to the acupuncturist, then to whether it works, then to what makes a scientific explanation (acupuncture in this case) convincing

Level	Descriptor	Example A	Example B	Example C	Example D	Example E
Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An open-ended question</li> <li>Explicitly about knowledge</li> <li>Couched in terms of TOK vocabulary and concepts<sup>1</sup></li> <li>Precise in terms of relationships between these concepts</li> </ul>	What is it about a scientific explanation that makes it convincing or unconvincing?	To what extent can the human sciences use mathematical techniques to make accurate predictions?	How can reason be used to justify religious belief?	What, if anything, do optical illusions tell us about sense perception and truth?	What role should intuition play in justifying capital punishment?
Intermediate	May be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>an open-ended question</li> <li>explicitly about knowledge</li> </ul>	How can we decide if acupuncture works or not?	How can we use models to predict crime waves?	Are religious beliefs reasonable?	What can we learn from optical illusions?	How can we know if capital punishment is right or wrong?
Poor	May be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a closed question</li> <li>implicitly about knowledge</li> </ul>	Does acupuncture work?	Will predictions on teenage smoking turn out to be correct?	How do religious people come to their beliefs?	Why do optical illusions happen?	Capital punishment: why should or shouldn't we adopt it?
Not a knowledge issue	May be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a statement or a description of a situation</li> <li>a closed question</li> <li>a subject-specific topic or question rather than about knowledge in itself</li> </ul>	Traditional medicine	Stopping teenagers smoking	Physics and God	Optical illusions	The execution of Saddam Hussein
Real-life situation	This could be the real-life situation for the presentation or an example in the essay:	My uncle went to an acupuncturist	A new government policy	Article on science and religion	An optical illusion	A book: <i>The Execution of Saddam Hussein</i>

<sup>1</sup> For these purposes, these are taken to be the areas of knowledge, the ways of knowing and the concepts in the linking questions—belief, certainty, culture, evidence, experience, explanation, interpretation, intuition, justification, truth and values.

Level	Descriptor	Example F	Example G	Example H	Example I	Your own knowledge issue
Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An open-ended question</li> <li>Explicitly about knowledge</li> <li>Couched in terms of TOK vocabulary and concepts<sup>2</sup></li> <li>Precise in terms of relationships between these concepts</li> </ul>	To what extent should we believe claims unjustified with physical evidence?				Your own highly focused knowledge issue
Intermediate	May be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>an open-ended question</li> <li>explicitly about knowledge</li> </ul>	Should we believe paranormal claims?				
Poor	May be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a closed question</li> <li>implicitly about knowledge</li> </ul>	Does the paranormal exist?	Why is Utilitarianism appealing?	Is swine flu likely to kill millions?		
Not a knowledge issue	May be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a statement or a description of a situation</li> <li>a closed question</li> <li>a subject-specific topic or question rather than about knowledge in itself</li> </ul>	What is the sixth sense?	Utilitarianism	What do we mean by an “epidemic”?	The credit crisis	
Real-life situation	This could be the real-life situation for the presentation or an example in the essay:	A film on haunting	A patriotic poster saying “Buy British—it’s good for everyone”	A news report on swine flu	An interview with bankers who have just lost their jobs	Your own topic



<sup>2</sup> For these purposes, these are taken to be the areas of knowledge, the ways of knowing and the concepts in the linking questions—belief, certainty, culture, evidence, experience, explanation, interpretation, intuition, justification, truth and values.