Knowledge questions

This section outlines the final part of the Think TOK process considered earlier in this chapter. Knowledge questions are at the heart of TOK and students are required to prepare a presentation and write an essay based on knowledge questions. Before you read any further, go back to the earlier section on knowledge claims (p30) and review the definition of knowledge claims in order to focus on what claims about knowledge mean.

Features of knowledge questions

- They are questions related to the methods and mechanisms by which we acquire knowledge and focus on the ways of knowing used to produce knowledge in an AOK.
  
  For example: What role does emotion play in supporting claims made in the natural sciences?

- They are open questions. There are many possible answers to these questions and there is no 'right' answer for a good question.
  
  Sometimes, good knowledge questions may inspire more questions about the same topic indicating different perspectives.
  
  For example: On what basis can one theory or explanation about the world be considered better than others?

- They are general questions. The vocabulary used in knowledge questions should not be subject specific. It should use general TOK concepts to focus on how knowledge is acquired in an AOK. (see page 52)
  
  A question such as 'What is Newton's law of gravitation?' uses vocabulary specific to natural sciences and would require a scientific response so is evidently not a general question.
  
  An example of a general question is: What role do reason and imagination play in generating a hypothesis about scientific processes?

Knowledge questions are questions about the nature of knowledge.
Here are some examples of questions that could be asked about one particular knowledge claim. Only one meets the criteria we have given for a good knowledge question.

**Knowledge claim:** There is evidence to indicate that swine flu has become an epidemic.

**How do we know when to believe something?**
Slightly open question that is about the source of knowledge and nature of evidence but it is too general and lacks TOK terms or concepts. Not a good knowledge question but certainly has the potential to be developed further.

**Will swine flu kill millions?**
A closed question that can be answered with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Not a knowledge question.

**What do we mean by an epidemic?**
Focusing on the term ‘epidemic’ is a good starting point. However this question is not about knowledge but about the meaning of the word ‘epidemic’. Such a question would need a scientific explanation which means that it is grounded in a specific subject. This is not a knowledge question.

**How much evidence do scientists need before they accept a theory is true?**
An open and general question about certainty and the nature of evidence [TOK concepts] required to justify the knowledge claim made. Whilst the question is based in the area of natural science, it can be discussed with reference to any area of knowledge. This is a good knowledge question that represents all the features discussed on the previous page.
Putting a knowledge question together

It is important to look at the different parts that make up a good knowledge question. Question starters like the ones listed in the diagram below make good open questions. These starters are vital in the formation of good knowledge questions. After the question starters, use a combination of one or more central TOK concepts (red box) and/or associated TOK concepts (blue box). You could also add a reference to a way[s] of knowing and/or areas of knowledge if relevant (green box).

The aim is not to use all the elements listed in the red, blue and green boxes from the diagram below but to select a combination of features relevant to the knowledge claims based on your real-life situation. At the bottom of the page, we have listed some of the most common concepts you're likely to encounter on the TOK course.

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Good questions starters: ‘to what extent...’, ‘how far...’, ‘how...’, ‘what role does...’, ‘under what circumstances...’

- **Central TOK concept to be explored such as:** justification, validity, bias, reliability, certainty etc. See the box below for a list of TOK concepts.

- **Associated TOK concept such as:** belief, evidence, faith, values, culture etc.

- **Reference to relevant AOK or WOK**

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- What role do **reason** and **intuition** play in the **justification** of ethical values or moral codes?

- To what extent can we speak of **certainty** when it comes to claims made in **history**?

- To what extent do the oral narratives of **indigenous knowledge systems** act as a **valid** means through which human nature can become knowable?

- How far is it possible to remain **rational** (relating to reason) with regards to **faith** and **beliefs**?

- Does the subjective nature of **evidence** in the **arts** make it any less **valid**?

- To what extent can **imagination** be considered a **valid** source for hypotheses?

- How far does **art** influence the **beliefs** of individuals and groups?

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**Terms and concepts commonly used in the creation of knowledge questions**

- Expert
- Belief
- Certainty
- Justification
- Concept
- Culture
- Faith
- Generalization
- Authority
- Bias
- Theory
- Evidence
- Truth
- Experience
- Explanation
- Interpretation
- Intuition
- Values
- Validity
- Reliability
- Subjectivity
- Objectivity
- Methods
- Verification
Unpicking terms and concepts

These TOK terms are useful because they help to steer investigations into clear knowledge areas. By unpacking the associated questions that arise from these terms you can show real depth of understanding of your knowledge questions.

For example, if we take the concept of an ‘EXPERT’ we may assume that this is:

An individual who holds appropriate qualifications and experience in a particular field of knowledge. Often they are considered authorities in their fields and as such are believed to be in possession of reliable and useful knowledge.

However, the very same term 'expert' throws up many subsidiary questions relating to knowledge that could be explored:

1. Who determines who is an expert? Is it a collective institution such as a government agency (e.g. Ministry of Education) or an educational institution (e.g. a university) that determines this? What criteria are used to bestow this 'expertise' on an individual?
2. How do labels such as professor or doctor affect how we perceive or accept knowledge claims made by these 'experts'?
3. If I had a passion for football (played the game and knew a lot about players and its history from years of following matches on TV) would I be an expert?
4. How do we reconcile two opposing viewpoints proposed by experts in the natural sciences?
5. What constitutes an expert in ethics? Are their claims as valid as ones made by experts in the natural sciences?

Let's look again at our example from page 49 in order to understand how the parts of the knowledge question come together.

**How much evidence do scientists need before they accept a theory is true?**

- **Good starter for an open-ended question.**
- **Reference to an AOK embedded within the reference to expert opinion in that specific AOK which in this context is the natural sciences.**
- **Central TOK concept of certainty. Note that the concept of certainty is implied here rather than explicitly suggested. One needs to be certain before they accept something as the truth. Relevant and satisfactory evidence will lead to certainty.**

Associated TOK term that refers to the central TOK concept of certainty relevant in this question. How much evidence do we need to be certain about something?
Assessment and knowledge questions

Knowledge questions are at the heart of assessment in TOK, but the essay and presentation take different approaches.

In the TOK presentation:
- You are expected to identify knowledge questions inherent in the real-life situation of your choice.
- You should demonstrate TOK analysis of those questions with the help of other relevant real-life situations.

In the TOK essay:
- You are provided with a prescribed list of six essay titles that are written with general TOK terms and have inherent knowledge questions.
- You are expected to identify the knowledge questions connected to the selected essay title.
- You then provide TOK analysis with real-life examples that lend themselves to the exploration of the identified knowledge questions.

Below is an example of how you can take a real-life situation, base a knowledge claim on it, then put together a knowledge question.

Shock Art is a form of art that uses disturbing images, sounds or scents to shock the audience in order to evoke a response. The proponents of this form of art claim to spread a social message by making bold statements or shocking the audience out of their 'smug complacency'. Despite the 'marketability' of this new form of art, some critics who hold a traditional view of art believe that this is not art and claim that it pollutes the cultural scene.

Can a dead shark preserved in formaldehyde be classed as a work of art?
Knowledge claim

Disturbing images, sounds and scents are considered as art by artists who want to shock the audience with the aim of promoting a social message.

Parts of the knowledge claim:
Central TOK concept – Justification
Possible associated TOK concepts – Expert opinion, bias, belief
AOKs – Emotion, perception
AOKs – Art, ethics, religious knowledge systems

Turning the parts of the knowledge claim into a knowledge question:

To what extent do **expert opinion** and **emotion** play a role in shaping our perception of what constitutes art?

**TASK**

In pairs or groups use the format of the example given here to complete the following tasks.

1. Select a real-life situation.
2. Identify a knowledge claim.
3. Discuss and agree on the parts of the knowledge claim.
4. Form a knowledge question using an appropriate opening phrase and the different parts agreed by your group.
5. Examine your knowledge question in order to demonstrate that it has all the required parts for a good knowledge question.