

What are knowledge questions and how do I compose such questions?

1) What are knowledge questions?

- Knowledge questions are questions about knowledge.
- Knowledge questions find their origin in real life situations and a knowledge question should be applicable to other real life situations. Even though knowledge questions may be philosophical in nature, you should be able to bring them back to real life situations.
- Knowledge questions are open ended.
- Knowledge questions can be directly related to the ways of knowing.
- Knowledge may directly be related to areas of knowledge.
- Knowledge questions may imply links between areas of knowledge and ways of knowing.
- Knowledge questions may explore distinctions and boundaries between subject areas.
- Knowledge questions may question what counts as knowledge and how we know.

- Knowledge questions may explore the use of models and predictions as a source of knowledge (eg in human sciences).
- Knowledge questions may explore the strengths and limitations of knowledge tools (eg ways of knowing) in the human search for the truth.
- Knowledge questions may explore the notion of evidence in areas of knowledge.
- Knowledge questions may explore who defines, 'possesses' and 'authorizes' knowledge.
- Knowledge questions should be explicitly about knowledge
- Knowledge questions are based on the TOK course and will often contain 'TOK vocabulary'.
- Many knowledge questions begin with the words 'how do we know', 'what counts as knowledge in...', 'to what extent...' and words such as 'belief', 'evidence', 'justification', 'certainty', 'culture', 'evidence', 'explanation', 'interpretation', 'truth', 'values', 'experience' may be part of the knowledge question.

Knowledge questions are not:

- Knowledge questions do not demand a yes/no answer in the style of a traditional debate.
- They should not ask subject specific questions (like you may get on a subject exam).

2) How do I come up with knowledge questions?

- a) Many knowledge questions begin with the words ‘how do we know’, ‘what counts as knowledge in...’, ‘to what extent...’ and words such as ‘belief’, ‘evidence’, ‘justification’, ‘certainty’, ‘culture’, ‘evidence’, ‘explanation’, ‘interpretation’, ‘truth’, ‘values’, ‘experience’ may be part of the knowledge question.
- b) You start from a real life situation (an article you have read, a situation in your family, something that has happened to you, a book you have read, a conversation, the curriculum you study at school)
- c) Using the TOK progression table, you develop this situation gradually into a knowledge question. Note that many different knowledge questions can be asked on the basis of the same real life situation.
- d) To check that your knowledge question is a good knowledge question you should ask yourself: ‘Is this question a question about knowledge?’ You should also try to apply your question to a different real life situation to check if it is an open ended question which is relevant beyond the confines of the real life situation or topic you started from.

Level	Descriptor	Example F	Example G	Example H	Example I	Your own knowledge issue
Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An open-ended question • Explicitly about knowledge • Couched in terms of TOK vocabulary and concepts² • Precise in terms of relationships between these concepts 					Your own highly focused knowledge issue
Intermediate	May be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an open-ended question • explicitly about knowledge 	Should we believe paranormal claims?				
Poor	May be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a closed question • implicitly about knowledge 	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"> • a statement or a description of a situation • a closed question • a subject-specific topic or question rather than about knowledge in itself 	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

The Progression table (from the TOK guide, 2009)

3) Examples of knowledge questions

(Taken from various sources such as the TOK subject reports, these are not my own examples and the list is obviously not exhaustive)

How do we know if a source or claim can be trusted?

How do we know what is morally right or wrong?

How do we know what our conclusions rest on?

How do we know if results are accurate?

Is Mathematics present in Nature?

How reliable is 'proof' in the Natural Sciences?

Are the human 'Sciences' really Science?

How useful is knowledge gained in History?

What is Scientific about Science?

How is a subject defined – are there disagreements?

Where are the boundaries of your subject?

What does your subject have in common with other subject areas?

Why is your subject area clustered in a specific Area of Knowledge? (See diagram above)

How should the various Areas of Knowledge be structured in a diagram, and why?

Does the word 'truth' have different meanings in different contexts?

What are the best grounds for saying that we know something rather than believe it?

In what ways can we overcome problems of knowing to arrive at an understanding of things as they really are?

How do provisionally accepted but distrusted beliefs become ones we are certain are true?

Are there areas where it is not necessary to rely on one's experience and culture to understand something?

To what extent can we understand knowledge claims from a different culture?

How important is the role of value judgements in different areas of knowledge?

In what ways and areas would the absence of experts most severely limit our knowledge?

Under what circumstances should we ignore the opinions of experts in the various areas of knowledge?

On what basis might we decide between the judgements of experts if they disagree?

To what extent is the knowledge that experts possess transferable?

To what extent do different areas of knowledge incorporate doubt as a part of their methods?

Under what circumstances might doubt undermine the construction or acquisition of knowledge?

Why is the possibility of doubt needed for knowledge?

Since doubt can be taken to be lack of convincing support for a claim, how can this lead to a situation in which the claim has convincing support?

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What counts as evidence in various areas of knowledge?

To what extent are we obliged as knowers to provide evidence for our beliefs?

How can we know when we have sufficient evidence?

What could be the value of an unsupported belief?

When is quantitative data superior to qualitative data in describing a phenomenon?

How do we deal with experiences and evidence which contradict or appear to contradict our theories?

To what extent does the methodology of an academic discipline remain constant?

To what extent does the methodology of an investigation limit or determine the outcomes that are possible?

Why might we be more concerned with process rather than product in the search for knowledge?
Is there always a clear distinction between content and methodology?

To what extent does truth exist in each area of knowledge regardless of whether we can recognize it?

To what extent is knowledge dependent upon having absolute distinctions between what is true and what is false?

How difficult is it to establish universal truths in various areas of knowledge?

Are there viable universal criteria for measuring progress that are applicable in all areas of knowledge?

To what extent is the degree of progress in an area of knowledge proportional to the value of that area?

Which ways of knowing are most useful in measuring progress?

What are the problems associated with progress in various areas of knowledge?

To what extent should academic disciplines be ranked according to their usefulness?

Why can new historical or scientific or ethical theories explain the same events in completely different ways to old theories?

What does it mean to „expand“ knowledge in ethics as opposed to knowledge in art?

In the construction of a model, how can we know which aspects of the world to include and which to ignore?

What aspects of the world are not amenable to representation by models?

How is new knowledge acquired through the use of models?

Since a model is, strictly speaking, false how can it lead to knowledge traditionally thought of as being true?

In what ways does language affect how we interpret the world?

Might the language(s) we speak affect how we understand ideas?

To what extent can we distinguish between rational and emotional inputs into decision-making?

What is the role of reason (or emotion) in trying to reach truth?

What does it mean to ‘rationally criticise’ a knowledge claim?

To what extent can reason operate in isolation from other ways of knowing?

What is the role of reasoning in making claims beyond our immediate experience?

Are there limits to what we can learn about the world through perception?

How can we address the problems of perception using reason? How can language be used to persuade and manipulate people in their beliefs?

How can our expectations affect how we perceive the world?

What is the scope, and what are the limits of sensory information in different areas of knowledge?

What kinds of truth are the arts capable of expressing?

To what extent are the insights available from the appreciation of a work of art dependent upon the intentions of the artist?

What could be meant by artistic truth?

What might be meant by a 'lie' in the context of an artwork?

To what extent are the limits of art defined by morality?

Do the arts allow us to discover truths that are difficult to express in straightforward language?

To what extent should, or can, value-laden language be avoided in the writing of history?

To what extent can the use of reason bring us closer to the truth in history?

To what extent does the use of language in history influence our understanding of the past?

To what extent is historical reasoning dependent on the language used by the historian?

How do moral judgements differ from other types of judgement?

Is there an analogue to the appeal to experiment in the natural sciences by which ethical claims can be tested (such as, for example, appeals to ethical intuitions)?

To what extent can we use reason to evaluate two competing ethical systems?

Are there ethical claims that are true regardless of what anyone thinks of them?

How can we be sure that scientific evidence gained through the use of technology is genuine?

How does a scientific explanation distinguish between correlation and causation?

How can we know when we have a good scientific explanation?

Is it true that all scientific beliefs are held provisionally and is this what makes science unique?

How does the scientific method allow scientists to develop explanations? Is there an equivalent method in other areas of knowledge?

What are the strengths and limitations of quantification in the human sciences?

How can we distinguish causal relationships from mere correlation?

Are there general laws that describe human behaviour?

Are there areas of human experience which cannot be quantified? If so, why?

How can we draw a clear line between fact and interpretation in history?

How does perception work to actively interpret events in History?

Does our interpretation of knowledge from the past allow us to reliably predict the future?

Are mathematical statements true because we define them to be so, or because we discover them to be so?

