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Knowledge Questions (TOK Essay 1.3)

Post 3/15



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Try to ask a KQ that actually interests you. You'll be more motivated to follow it through --not only answering it, but doing deeper and deeper into the challenging aspects of it.

I was going to do a big activity with you, where I had you develop different Knowledge Questions (KQs), but I know you're strapped for time. So, instead I thought I would just tell you a few things and then give you two helpful resources you can use when deciding on your own KQ's.

Before we do this, let me answer a common question about KQ's. The question often looks like this:

QUESTION: "The IB TOK Essay Assessment Instrument states that the essay must be focused on knowledge questions, but your structure recommends that IB students focus on and form an answer for only one knowledge question. Can you explain?"

ANSWER: I have students write down and then fully answer one KQ. For example, "to what extent is reason reliable?" But then to answer this they address a number of sub-questions, such as "to what extent is reason reliable in the arts?" By answering the sub-questions, they answer the main KQ. This has worked in the past. The students answer a variety of implied KQ's basically.

Now, let's look at feedback from a recent PT. You can see **some examples of exact KQ's that the IB would have liked for those titles.**

The second one is a list of great knowledge questions (organised by topic), which are mostly pulled from previous years' TOK Subject Reports (IB feedback or ToK teachers). These should also help to give you a really solid idea of a KQ that could work for your PT.

Download the audio file for this lesson in the downloads section on the right of the page (or under this writing if you're on your phone).

First some advice: What makes a "good" KQ

1) When you read the list of KQ's (below) you'll notice that they are **all need to be answered talking about "knowledge"** in general, rather than just about "history" or "psychology" or something. That's the biggest thing about a good KQ. Obviously, you'll want to compare these to the KQs that you were considering using for the 2 titles you're considering at this point and make sure your KQ is about knowledge directly. That's what ToK is about. Here are some examples to illustrate this, right [out of the ToK Guide](#):

Example 1: Regarding future population growth in Africa

Not a knowledge question: "How can we predict future population growth in Africa?" This is not a knowledge question because it is a technical question within the discipline of population studies.

Good knowledge question: "How can a mathematical model give us knowledge even if it does not yield accurate predictions?" This is now sufficiently general and explores the purpose and nature of mathematical modelling.

Example 2: Regarding the placebo effect and its impact on the medical profession

Not a knowledge question: "How does the placebo effect work?" An answer to this might involve a technical explanation in psychology. This therefore sits above the line in figure 4.

A good knowledge question: "How could we establish that X is an 'active ingredient' in causing Y?" This question is actually a rather general one about how we can know about causal links. It is a classic knowledge question.

2) **It has to respond directly to the prescribed title.** It needs to be clear to you and the marker that your KQ (once answered) will make the PT much easier to understand. It doesn't need to completely answer it --which is great because sometimes it seems like it would be impossible to fully, convincingly answer some of the PTs --but it needs to at least attempt to address the issues the PT is raising.

3) **A good KQ has to be one that works for you.** You need to be able to figure out which AOKs and WoKs are going to work with it, etc. Someone else may have told you it was perfect. That person might be your teacher. But, it's not actually perfect unless you can figure out how to use it. You need to be comfortable with it. If you find it's not working, just switch it.

4) **It should also be a little challenging.** This might seem to contradict with point #3 above, but the KQ should normally force you to think a little bit --to push you a bit out of your comfort zone. This way you'll hopefully be able to have more original thoughts and hopefully impress the marker.

The "first one": KQ examples for a recent PT

4. "That which is accepted as knowledge today is sometimes discarded tomorrow." Consider knowledge issues raised by this statement in two areas of knowledge. (A May 2014 PT).

Seven examples of knowledge issues that (the IB themselves said) could be addressed in the development of an essay on this title:

1. Is the discarding of accepted knowledge a routine feature of areas of knowledge?
2. By whom might an accepted knowledge claim legitimately be discarded? Who is empowered to accept it in the first place?
3. Do the changes in knowledge over time imply changes in the standards for justification?
4. Is it a good thing that knowledge claims are accepted, only to be abandoned later and superseded by other knowledge claims?
5. Are there different standards for accepting or discarding knowledge in different areas of knowledge?
6. Do the processes of accepting and discarding imply that progress is being made in areas of knowledge?
7. Given the continual accepting and discarding of knowledge, what are the implications of maintaining that knowledge is justified true belief?

The second one: The Big List of Examples of Knowledge Questions

Here are some example knowledge issues that you might like to use as inspiration for your essay. These are mostly taken from some past years' TOK Subject Reports. As you read these, you should of course be thinking about the prescribed titles you're considering.

Questions related to truth & knowledge:

- 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?

Questions related to value judgements:

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

Questions related to the role of experts:

- 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?

Questions related to the role of doubt:

- 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?

Questions related to the use of evidence:

- 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?

Questions related to content vs. methodology:

- 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?

Questions related to absolute vs. universal truths:

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

Questions related to progress in 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?

Questions related to the role of models:

- 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?

Questions related to ways of Knowing:

Language:

- In what ways does language affect how we interpret the world?
- Might the language(s) we speak affect how we understand ideas?

Reason & Emotion:

- 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?

Perception:

- 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?

Questions related to areas of knowledge:

The Arts:

- 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?

History:

- 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?

Ethics:

- 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?

The Natural Sciences:

- 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?

The Human Sciences:

- 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?

History:

- 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?

Maths:

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

Say something interesting...

Add Comment



Yewon Jung

I don't exactly understand this question.
How does a scientific explanation distinguish between correlation and causation?
Can you please provide an explanation?

on Feb 3 [Reply](#)



Tim Woods

That one is simply about the way that science tries to handle that difficulty we get where sometimes something seems caused by something and yet it isn't. I'm sure you've seen examples of this before (correlation suggesting causation i.e. <https://images.ctfassets.net/vrkkgjbn4fsk/6zStaOhyU0II1ktEbqsFUN/1504e23f790afdda052f3516b8bc1089/correlation-vs-causation.png?q=90&w=3066>) So Scientists are curious about how to design studies that actually prove causation. Does that make sense?

on Feb 3 [Reply](#)



8 Comments

Priya Gopiraj

is the question is reason relative in coming to ethical decisions a good KQ

on Nov 17, 2019 [Reply](#)



Tim Woods

Hi Priya, I would recommend focusing on questions that relate more directly to the production of knowledge. "To what extent is reason reliable?" is a great one, for example, because it relates directly how reason works to produce knowledge (and how that is in some ways great and in other ways limited). The question about reason being relative is also not great because reason itself isn't really relative. It's more that values can be relative. One person's unethical is different than someone else's. Both of those people can use reason to defend their position, but again I would (personally) say the reason itself is relative. Hope that helps.

on Nov 19, 2019 [Reply](#)



robert

can we take one of these questions for the essay or not?

on Sep 30, 2019 [Reply](#)



Tim Woods

Hi Robert. You might be able to. The most important thing, in your TOK essay, is that you are answering the question. The second most important thing is that you write about aspects of knowledge --such as "How do we know things?" Or "What can we know?" I would recommend using those questions (I listed above) more to get a sense of the kinds of things we're interested in, in the course. And perhaps they can give you some ideas for what you might want to write about. But answering the prescribed title question is the main thing. Do you want to talk about any of the new titles? We could do that in here: <https://www.ibmastery.com/products/ib-tok/community/feed>

on Sep 30, 2019 [Reply](#)



Nurulasyiqin Ikhwan Nasir

What are the famous names in human science that is dominant in tok?

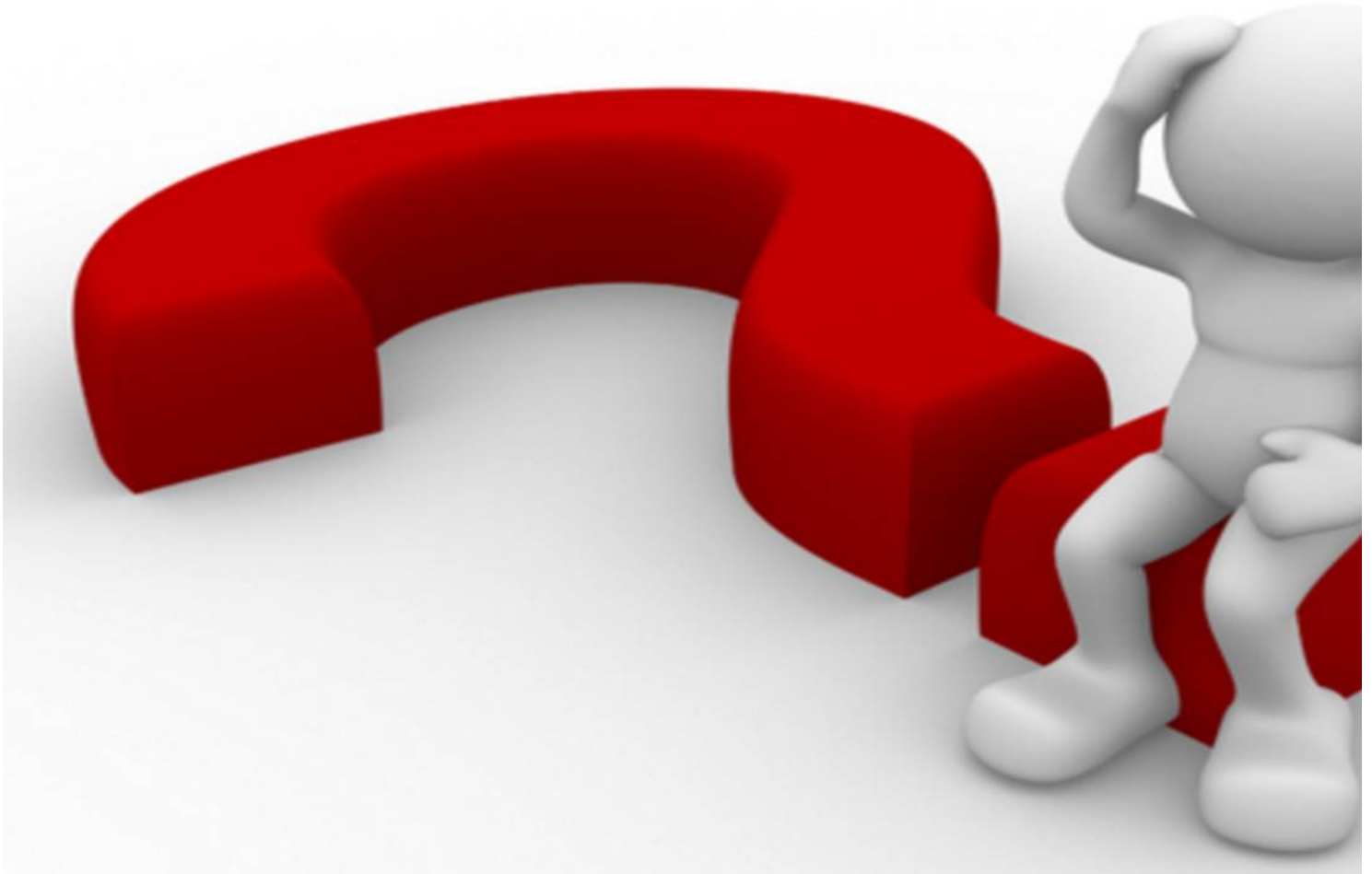
on Jan 22, 2019 [Reply](#)



Tim Woods

There are a lot of great theorists in Human Science that we use in TOK. It really depends on the area of Human Science that you're focusing on, if you want to know the most famous ones.

on Mar 10, 2019 [Reply](#)



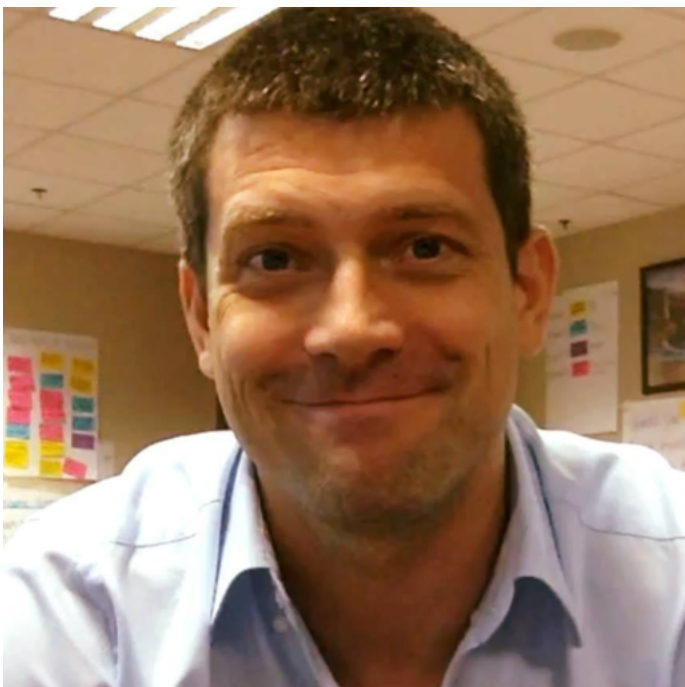
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Tim Woods

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