Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma
SECOND EDITION

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Our IB Diploma resources aim to:
• encourage learners to explore concepts, ideas and topics that have local and global significance
• help students develop a positive attitude to learning in preparation for higher education
• assist students in approaching complex questions, applying critical-thinking skills and forming reasoned answers.
According to the philosopher Martin Heidegger, ‘in all teaching, the teacher learns the most’. This book is dedicated to the countless students and teachers I have met whose ideas have informed, inspired and delighted me.
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Introduction

This textbook is designed to be used with the theory of knowledge course in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, but it may also be useful for students following other critical thinking courses.

The main question in theory of knowledge (TOK) is ‘How do you know?’ The course encourages you to think critically about the subjects you are studying rather than passively accepting what you are taught. Critical thinking involves such things as asking good questions, using language with care and precision, supporting your ideas with evidence, arguing coherently and making sound judgements. You are, of course, encouraged to think critically in every subject that you study. TOK is designed to help you to reflect on and further develop the thinking skills you have acquired in your other subjects.

Knowledge claims and knowledge questions

The TOK course is built around analysing knowledge claims by formulating and exploring knowledge questions.

A knowledge claim is an assertion that something is the case. Any statement that can be true or false makes a knowledge claim. For example: ‘Santiago is the capital of Chile’; ‘I’m in love’; ‘It’s raining’; ‘The universe is expanding’; ‘Hitler was a monster’; ‘2 + 2 = 4’; ‘Cats grow on trees’. Our everyday conversation is riddled with knowledge claims and we are bombarded by such claims at school, in the media and on the internet.

A knowledge question is, as the name suggests, a question about knowledge. Such questions have three key features:

1. They are second-order questions. A first-order question is a question about the world; a second-order question is a question about knowledge. In relation to academic subjects, first-order questions arise within a subject whereas second-order questions are about a subject. For example, ‘Is the universe expanding?’ is a first-order question which is dealt with by physics, whereas ‘How certain is scientific knowledge?’ is a second-order question and is part of TOK.

2. They are contested questions. Knowledge questions do not have straightforward answers and they are open to discussion and debate. Since they are contested, such questions require personal thought and judgement. The fact that there are rarely definitive answers in TOK is sometimes a source of frustration, but it can also be intellectually exhilarating.

3. They are general questions. Knowledge questions are concerned not so much with specific examples, such as the ethics of the Milgram experiment on human obedience (see page 387), as with underlying principles and criteria. A good knowledge question here might be: ‘How can we know what ethical constraints to put on experiments in the human sciences?’
Introduction

An additional feature of knowledge questions is that they are often comparative. We might, for example, compare the reliability of different sources of knowledge, such as reason and intuition, or different areas of knowledge such as mathematics and ethics.

As you work through the TOK course, you might find it useful to keep in mind the following ‘high altitude’ knowledge questions:

1. Meaning: what does it mean?
2. Evidence: what counts as evidence?
3. Certainty: how certain is it?
4. Perspective: how else can we look at it?
5. Limitations: what are the limitations?
6. Value: why does it matter?
7. Connections: how similar/different is it to/from…?

A TOK diagram

There is no ‘official’ TOK diagram, but as will be discussed in Chapter 1, diagrams and maps are useful ways of making sense of the corresponding territory – as long as we do not take them too literally. Teachers using this textbook should keep in mind that the IB TOK subject guide explicitly states that it ‘offers a framework rather than prescribed content’ and that teachers should ‘construct their own unique TOK course around key TOK concepts’. With that in mind, Figure B presents one way of making sense of the course and integrating its key elements in a single diagram. (These elements are explained after the diagram.)
Introduction

How this book is organised

This textbook consists of five main parts:

1. Knowers and knowing
2. Ways of knowing
3. Areas of knowledge
4. The big picture
5. Assessment

The first three parts reflect the three main elements as shown in Figure B.

1. Knowers and knowing. Since TOK is concerned with the question ‘How do you know?’, we need to say something about the nature of knowledge. Among the questions we shall be asking are:

   - What is knowledge?
   - How does knowledge differ from belief?
   - What is the difference between knowledge and information?
   - Is knowledge primarily a personal or a shared phenomenon?
   - How does practical knowledge differ from theoretical knowledge?
   - How reliable are second-hand sources of knowledge such as school, the internet and the news media?
Introduction

2. Ways of knowing (WOKs). The TOK course suggests that there are eight main ways of acquiring knowledge about the world: language, perception, reason, emotion, intuition, imagination, memory, and faith. Take anything that you claim to know and ask yourself how you know it and you can probably trace it back to one of these eight sources. Despite their value, none of these ways of knowing is infallible. In fact, they are all double-edged in the sense that they can be both a source of knowledge and an obstacle to it. For example, your senses may generally be reliable, but your eyes can sometimes deceive you. So we will need to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each of these ways of knowing.

3. Areas of knowledge (AOKs). We then consider the various areas of knowledge – mathematics, the natural sciences, the human sciences, history, the arts, ethics and religion. These areas are ultimately based on the ways of knowing, but each one has its own distinctive scope, method and history. In addition to analysing the different AOKs, we also touch on some of the ‘big questions’ that lie at the frontiers of knowledge. For example:
   - Why is mathematics so useful?
   - Does science prove things?
   - What makes human beings different?
   - Can the past be known?
   - Do we have free will?
   - Are there any universal values?
   - Is everyone selfish?
   - What is the purpose of art?
   - Does life have a meaning?

   We will also consider the similarities and differences between the above areas of knowledge and raise various comparative questions that will help you to think about how different subjects are related to one another and to develop a more coherent and inclusive picture of the world.

4. The big picture. Finally, we try to pull together the various strands in our exploration of knowledge. We look at cultural perspectives on knowledge and ask how, for example, ‘western’, ‘eastern’ and ‘indigenous’ cultures contribute to our understanding of the world. We then raise more abstract questions about the nature of truth, such as:
   - To what extent are we able to know the truth?
   - Should we seek the truth at any price?

   This leads on to a discussion about the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Perhaps the most important element of wisdom is a sense of humility and an understanding that there may be limits to knowledge.

5. Assessment. Following the main text, there are two chapters which give detailed support and guidance on all aspects of the TOK essay and TOK presentation.

   Although the chapters in this book are arranged to be consistent with the diagram shown in Figure B, they do not have to be read in the order in which they appear in the book; there may be other equally valid paths through the material.
Introduction

Chapter features
In addition to the main body of the text, each chapter contains the following features:

• Quotations appear at the beginning of each chapter and may provoke your own thoughts about the topic.
• Activity questions appear regularly throughout the text and encourage you to engage with the issues under discussion and reflect on them.
• Key terms are helpfully defined in the margins and listed at the end of each chapter. They are indicated by the initials ‘KT’ and are coloured green.
• Linking questions encourage you to make connections with other ways of knowing and other areas of knowledge. They are indicated by the initials ‘LQ’ and are coloured purple.
• Real-life situations appear at regular intervals and help you to relate theory to practice. Most consist of brief headlines which you can research online to get the full story. Some may give you ideas for a TOK presentation. They are indicated by the initials ‘RLS’ and are coloured blue.
• Knowledge framework focus, which appears at the end of each chapter in Part 3, highlights some of the main characteristics of each area of knowledge.
• Key points are summarised at the end of each chapter and are useful for quick reference.
• Further reading includes books for in-depth exploration and stimulating articles which can be found online.
• IB prescribed essay titles are provided at the end of each chapter in Parts 1–4 so that you can relate the material covered to possible essay questions.

Personal thought
The vast majority of the questions raised in this book do not have definite answers, but this does not make them any less important. My aim in writing this book is not to save you the effort of thinking about these issues, but to provoke you to think about them for yourself. My hope is that you will be able to relate what I have written to your own experience and that this book will help you to find your way to your own conclusions.