

# Theory of knowledge prescribed titles

November 2009 and May 2010

## Instructions to candidates

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Your theory of knowledge essay for examination must be submitted to your teacher for authentication. It must be written on one of the ten titles (questions) provided below. You may choose any title, but are recommended to consult with your teacher. Your essay will be marked according to the assessment criteria published in the *Theory of Knowledge* guide. Remember to centre your essay on knowledge issues and, where appropriate, refer to other parts of your IB programme and to your experiences as a knower. Always justify your statements and provide relevant examples to illustrate your arguments. Pay attention to the implications of your arguments, and remember to consider what can be said against them. If you use external sources, cite them according to a recognized convention.

Note that statements in quotations in these titles are not necessarily authentic: they present a real point of view but may not have been spoken or written by an actual person. It is appropriate to analyse them but it is unnecessary, even unwise, to spend time on researching a context for them.

Examiners mark essays against the title as set. Respond to the title exactly as given; do not alter it in any way.

Your essay must be between 1200 and 1600 words in length.

1. To what extent is truth different in mathematics, the arts and ethics?
2. Examine the ways empirical evidence should be used to make progress in different areas of knowledge.
3. Discuss the strengths and limitations of quantitative and qualitative data in supporting knowledge claims in the human sciences and at least one other area of knowledge.
4. How can the different ways of knowing help us to distinguish between something that is true and something that is believed to be true?
5. "What separates science from all other human activities is its belief in the provisional nature of all conclusions" (Michael Shermer, [www.edge.org](http://www.edge.org)). Critically evaluate this way of distinguishing the sciences from other areas of knowledge?
6. All knowledge claims should be open to rational criticism. On what grounds and to what extent would you agree with this assertion?
7. "We see and understand things not as they are but as we are." Discuss this claim in relation to at least two ways of knowing.
8. "People need to believe that order can be glimpsed in the chaos of events" (adapted from John Gray, *Heresies*, 2004). In what ways and to what extent would you say this claim is relevant in at least two areas of knowledge?
9. Discuss the claim that some areas of knowledge are discovered and others are invented.
10. What similarities and differences are there between historical and scientific explanations?

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Examiners mark essays against the title as set. Respond to the title exactly as given; do not alter it in any way.

Your essay must be between 1200 and 1600 words in length.

- 1 “Science is built of facts the way a house is built of bricks: but an accumulation of facts is no more science than a pile of bricks is a house” (Henri Poincaré). Discuss in relation to science and at least one other area of knowledge.
- 2 When should we trust our senses to give us truth?
- 3 Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of reason as a way of knowing.
- 4 “Seek simplicity, and distrust it” (Alfred North Whitehead). Is this always good advice for a knower?
- 5 “In expanding the field of knowledge we but increase the horizon of ignorance” (Henry Miller). Is this true?
- 6 Compare and contrast our approach to knowledge about the past with our approach to knowledge about the future.
- 7 “Moral wisdom seems to be as little connected to knowledge of ethical theory as playing good tennis is to knowledge of physics” (Emrys Westacott). To what extent should our actions be guided by our theories in ethics and elsewhere?
- 8 To understand something you need to rely on your own experience and culture. Does this mean that it is impossible to have objective knowledge?
- 9 “The knowledge that we value the most is the knowledge for which we can provide the strongest justifications.” To what extent would you agree with this claim?
- 10 “There can be no knowledge without emotion.... until we have felt the force of the knowledge, it is not ours” (adapted from Arnold Bennett). Discuss this vision of the relationship between knowledge and emotion.



# International Baccalaureate Theory of knowledge prescribed titles

November 2007 and May 2008

## Instructions to candidates

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Examiners mark essays against the title as set. Respond to the title exactly as given; do not alter it in any way.

Your essay must be between 1200 and 1600 words in length.

- 1 Evaluate the role of intuition in different areas of knowledge.
- 2 Are reason and emotion equally necessary in justifying moral decisions?
- 3 “History is always on the move, slowly eroding today’s orthodoxy and making space for yesterday’s heresy.” Discuss the extent to which this claim applies to history and at least one other area of knowledge.
- 4 Does language play roles of equal importance in different areas of knowledge?
- 5 “...we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology.” (Noam Chomsky). To what extent would you agree?
- 6 In areas of knowledge such as the arts and the sciences, do we learn more from work that follows or that breaks with accepted conventions?
- 7 Our senses tell us that a table, for example, is a solid object; science tells us that the table is mostly empty space. Thus two sources of knowledge generate conflicting results. Can we reconcile such conflicts?
- 8 Are some ways of knowing more likely than others to lead to truth?
- 9 Mathematicians have the concept of rigorous proof, which leads to knowing something with complete certainty. Consider the extent to which complete certainty might be achievable in mathematics and at least one other area of knowledge.
- 10 “Context is all” (Margaret Atwood). Does this mean that there is no such thing as truth?



# International Baccalaureate Theory of knowledge prescribed titles

November 2006 and May 2007

## Instructions to candidates

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Your theory of knowledge essay for examination must be submitted to your teacher for authentication. It must be written on one of the ten titles (questions) provided below. You may choose any title, but are recommended to consult with your teacher. Your essay will be marked for proficiency in the six domains that are described in the assessment criteria published in the *Theory of Knowledge* guide. Remember to centre your essay on problems of knowledge and, where appropriate, refer to other parts of your IBO programme and to your experiences as a knower. Always justify your statements and provide relevant examples to illustrate your arguments. Pay attention to the implications of your arguments, and remember to consider what can be said against them. If you use external sources, cite them according to a recognized convention.

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Examiners mark essays against the title as set. Respond to the title exactly as given; do not alter it in any way.

Your essay must be between 1200 and 1600 words in length.

- 1 When mathematicians, historians and scientists say that they have explained something, are they using the word 'explain' in the same way?
- 2 It is often claimed that scientific results must be replicable. Is this possible or desirable in other Areas of Knowledge?
- 3 If someone claims that both the division of knowledge into disciplines and the division of the world into countries on a map are artificial, what does this mean? What is the nature of the boundaries between Areas of Knowledge, in your view?
- 4 Is it an oversimplification to claim that some Ways of Knowing give us facts while others provide interpretations?
- 5 Can literature "tell the truth" better than other Arts or Areas of Knowledge?
- 6 Compare the roles played by reason and imagination in at least two Areas of Knowledge.
- 7 Discuss the ways in which value judgments should and should not be used in different Areas of Knowledge.
- 8 Some experts (athletes, dancers, musicians, visual artists, cabinet makers, lab technicians, mechanics, surgeons, etc.) may have acquired knowledge that is difficult to describe in words. Does this mean that other Ways of Knowing play a more important role than language in knowing how to do something?
- 9 Can a machine know?
- 10 Belief has been described as "certainty about what cannot be seen". Does this statement hold true in any, some or all Areas of Knowledge?



# International Baccalaureate

## Theory of Knowledge prescribed titles

November 2005 and May 2006

### Instructions to candidates

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Your Theory of Knowledge essay for examination must be submitted to your teacher for authentication. It must be written on one of the ten titles (questions) provided below. You may choose any title, but are recommended to consult with your teacher. Your essay will be marked for proficiency in the six domains which are described in the assessment criteria published in the Theory of Knowledge guide. Remember to centre your essay on problems of knowledge and, where appropriate, refer to other parts of your IBO programme and to your experiences as a knower. Always justify your statements and provide relevant examples to illustrate your arguments. Pay attention to the implications of your arguments, and remember to consider what can be said against them. If you use external sources, cite them according to a recognized convention.

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Examiners mark essays against the title as set. Respond to the title exactly as given; do not alter it in any way.

Your essay must be between 1200 and 1600 words in length.

- 1 There are many different authorities, including academics, politicians, global organizations and companies, who make knowledge claims. As an experienced TOK student, what criteria do you use to distinguish between knowledge, opinion and propaganda?
- 2 “Tell me how you’re conducting your search and I’ll tell you what you’re looking for.” To what extent do the methods used in different Areas of Knowledge determine the scope of the research and the conclusions you can reach?
- 3 Statistics can be very helpful in providing a powerful interpretation of reality but also can be used to distort our understanding. Discuss some of the ways in which statistics can be used or misused in different Areas of Knowledge to assist and mislead us, and how we can determine whether to accept the statistical evidence that is presented to us.
- 4 To what extent do personal attributes affect Ways of Knowing and why, if at all, does answering this question matter in the first place?
- 5 Do questions like “Why should I be moral?” or “Why shouldn’t I be selfish?” have definitive answers as do some questions in other Areas of Knowledge? Does having a definitive answer make a question more or less important?
- 6 If education means learning to see through the clichés of one’s time, how does learning in the different Areas of Knowledge and in TOK contribute to this education?
- 7 Some people say that religious beliefs can be neither justified nor refuted by reason. However, while sometimes this claim is used as a reason for rejecting religious beliefs, at other times it is used to conclude that these beliefs are established by faith. To what extent is faith a legitimate basis for knowledge claims, in religion and different Areas of Knowledge?
- 8 Arthur Eddington noted that an ordinary view of the world, one “which spontaneously appears around me when I open my eyes” is “a strange compound of external nature, mental imagery and inherited prejudice” (Sir Arthur Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World*, 1928). How accurate a description is this of everyday experience?
- 9 Compare and contrast knowing a friend to knowing how to swim, knowing a scientific theory and knowing a historical period. What conclusions about the nature of knowledge can you reach?
- 10 Sometimes we hear reasoned arguments that oppose a view to which we are emotionally committed; sometimes we hear a passionate plea for a view we have good reason to reject. Bearing this in mind, discuss the importance of reason and emotion in distinguishing between belief and knowledge?