

# Introduction

This publication offers a contribution to the discussion around the nature and practice of ‘ways of knowing’ within the study of religion and non-religion in school RE, RW, RVE, RME (see the note above). It reflects the growing interest in helping students to know not only ‘stuff’, but also how that stuff came to be known. Some of those who have contributed to that wider discussion have set out their thinking in these pages.

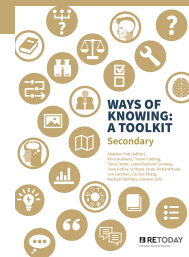
‘Ways of knowing’ help bring a layer of transparency into the subject, where students are not just expected to take a teacher’s word for it, or to simply accept what a textbook says because someone has gone to the trouble and expense of printing it. Instead, we are beginning to focus more on the nature of our sources, and to introduce students to an awareness of the assumptions that sit behind them, the validity or credibility of their accounts or claims (and why, and who says), and the arena in which they are intended to speak.

This also means drawing students’ attention to the methods used to create and examine sources, and equipping them to be able to apply some of those methods for themselves. We have included some icons to represent different ways of knowing, which you might find helpful with students.

The term ‘ways of knowing’ is sometimes used to apply to academic disciplines. This requires teachers and students to have some understanding of the kinds of questions that disciplines ask and the kinds of methods that they use to address these questions. This publication draws on the ‘Investigator Files’ from an earlier series of secondary books, Challenging Knowledge in RE. Do look at those six books – they contain a wide range of practical resources for using disciplinary ways of knowing in the classroom.

**Stephen Pett, Editor**

Extract from  
*Ways of  
Knowing: a  
toolkit*



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## 7. Disciplines as ‘ways of knowing’

### Tracing origins

The idea of using distinct disciplines within RE has been around for some time:

- The ‘RE-searchers’ work of Giles and Rob Freathy (from 2013)<sup>7</sup> set out ways of enabling primary pupils to become researchers in the classroom. The approach encourages pupils to take part in a dialogue about the different ways one can explore religion.
- The Norfolk Agreed Syllabus in 2019<sup>8</sup> directed pupils into different disciplinary fields, using questions from theology, philosophy, and human and social sciences.
- The RE Today multidisciplinary RE series *Challenging Knowledge in RE*<sup>9</sup> built directly on the work of Freathy and Freathy. It gives examples of how you can use approaches from theology, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology and religious studies in RE. The books provide examples of research from within the various disciplines, and practical guidance on helping students to apply some of the methods in the classroom.

RE Today started planning its multidisciplinary series in 2019 and published Vol. 1 in January 2021. Since then, interest in disciplinary approaches has been further stimulated by Ofsted’s research review (2021)<sup>10</sup> and the RE Council’s *Handbook for Curriculum Writers* (2024).<sup>11</sup>

### Outlining value

Within both of these latter publications, ‘ways of knowing’ is broad and can incorporate disciplines. The authors argue that some of the benefits of disciplinary approaches include understanding that:

- you can ask different questions about the same content
- answering these questions will require different kinds of methods
- the findings might be interpreted appropriately in different ways – there are not always clear answers
- evaluating the findings will require a set of tools appropriate to the methods and disciplines
- all of the above are affected by the context of the learner/researcher and their personal worldview<sup>12</sup>

Using such approaches can help deepen students’ knowledge, understanding and skills in handling ideas that matter, and enable them to participate in the scholarly discourses that take place in academic communities.

### Locating ways of knowing within disciplines

So far, this publication has focused on ‘ways of knowing’ as a range of methods that might be used to address a variety of questions. This is the model RE Today has used with its *Understanding Muslims, Understanding Islam* project. These methods or tools, set out as icons, can be selected with younger students without necessarily connecting with disciplines. However, as students develop their understanding, they can explore how different disciplines might use a range of these methods in a variety of ways, each with their own assumptions. This helps to create ‘epistemic environments in which expert knowledge can be encountered and developed’.<sup>13</sup>

### Considering assumptions

Different disciplines may make use of some of the same methods, but with different assumptions and in different ways. For example, theology and sociology have contrasting starting points:

- Theology might start with an assumption that a God exists and move from there to explore what this God might be like and what people should do as a result.
- Sociology does not start with any kind of supernatural assumption. It looks at individuals, groups and organisations that make up society, and looks for naturalistic explanations for how society works and changes.

With younger students, you might loosely characterise these two disciplines as looking from ‘insider’ (theology) and ‘outsider’ (sociology) perspectives – although things are obviously more complex than that!<sup>14</sup>