



The Sea of Unknowing

A self-help tool

Introduction

Sometimes when we want to choose a career we can fall into the trap of thinking we need to be 100% certain before we can commit. However, life is full of uncertainties. In fact, most decisions, even those made by experts, are based on limited and imperfect information (Omand, 2020, pp. 19-38).

One reason some people get bogged down in making a career decision is that they think they need to keep getting more and more information before they are able to fully understand the situation.

This exercise shows how little information we have at our disposal in everyday life. The take home message is that when making decisions, it is unrealistic to try to find every single last piece of information. It's okay not to know.

While we should aim to do a reasonable amount of research, trying to do too much leads to the law of diminishing returns. There comes the point where practically we've gone as far as we can, and we need to use the information we've got.

This tool is designed to...

- Show how little knowledge we actually need on a day-to-day basis to survive.
- Help us reflect upon the place of information in making decisions.
- Encourage us to be open minded and embrace uncertainty.

Consider using this tool if you...

- Feel you need to keep finding out more information about a career options before you can make a decision.
- Think that you need to be 100% certain about a career before making a choice.
- Feel that your desire to be in control is stopping you from taking action and making progress.

How to use this tool

First, get a blank a piece of A4 white paper.

This represents all the knowledge that is currently available to humanity.

Second, draw a shape that represents all the information and ideas that you have come across in your life to date.

Of course, strictly speaking you won't really be able to make the size of your diagram proportional. Rather, you just need your diagram to give an idea of the contrast in the between the total sum of knowledge and your share of it. Shade in all the space outside the line you have just drawn.

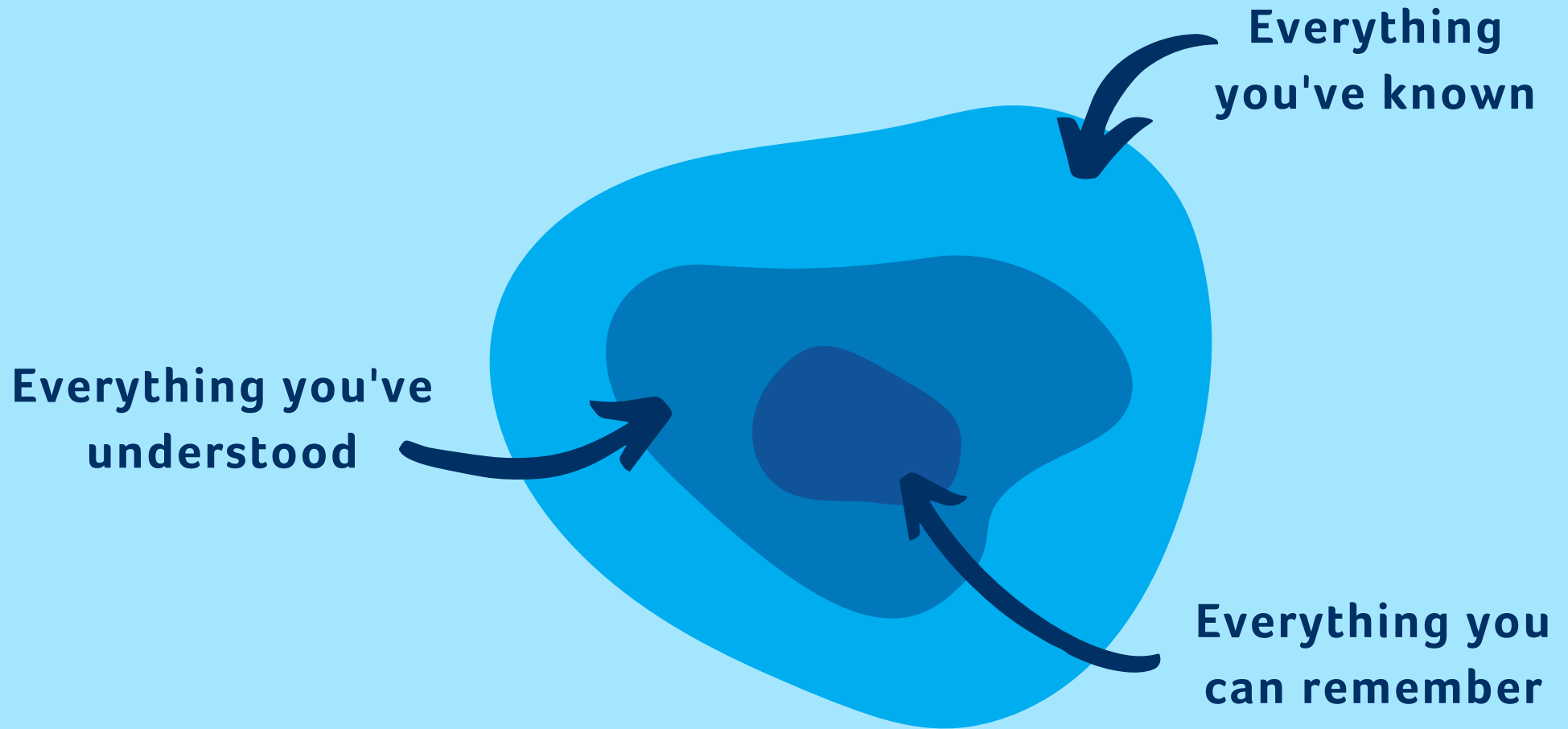
Third, draw another shape (inside the one you've just drawn) to represent all the information and ideas that you've understood.

Shade in all the space outside the line you have just drawn.

Four, draw another shape (inside the one you've just drawn) to represent all the information and ideas you can still remember now.

You should be left with a white shape surrounded by a dark shaded area covering most of the sheet of paper.

All human knowledge



This represents all the knowledge that is currently available to humanity. The white shape stands for the information you understand and right now have at your disposal. Each moment of our waking days we are like a small boat, floating on a vast sea of unknowing.

Furthermore, knowledge doesn't stand still. It's always growing and being added to. In the 1980s, the American futurologist Buckminster Fuller famously argued that until 1900 the total amount of human knowledge doubled every 100 years, but by 1945 this had increased to every 25 years (Sorokin, 2019). Recent research suggests that by 2020 human knowledge is doubling every 12 hours (Shilling, 2013, as cited in Chamberlain, 2019).

Accepting how little we can know liberate us from the false expectation of complete knowledge. It reminds us that we don't and can't know everything about a situation. It encourages us to go ahead and make a decision, provided we've done a sensible amount of research, even if we feel uncertain.

Some writers have used the image of a wave to picture the exponential increase in knowledge. If you like metaphors, you can see this as an invitation to embrace uncertainty and surf the waves and see where it takes you.



Pause, Reflect, Act

- What are the key insights you've taken from this self-help guide?
- What actions do you need to take now to build on this exercise?
- Who could help you with this?
- Are there other related self-help tools you'd like to use as well?

NB: Because everyone is different, no one solution is a magic bullet, so please also look at our other self-help tools and use the ones that work best for you.

Other tools that are related to working with uncertainty include:

- **Camper Van Career Choice** (a way to make a tentative / temporary careers decision as a basis for action).
- **Go with the Flow** (a strategy for job seeking when you really can't decide between two or three options).
- **Informational Interviewing** (a guide to finding out inside career information from professional people in work – an approach if there are key pieces of information that you do need to finalise a career decision.)

References and Resources

- Chamberlain, P. (2020). Knowledge is not everything. *Design for Health*, 4(1), 1-3. doi: [10.1080/24735132.2020.1731203](https://doi.org/10.1080/24735132.2020.1731203).
- Omand, D. (2020). *How Spies Think: Ten Lessons in Intelligence*. Viking Penguin Books.
- Sorokin, S. (2019, April 5). *Thriving in a World of "Knowledge Half-Life"*. CIO. <https://www.cio.com/article/3387637/thriving-in-a-world-of-knowledge-half-life.html#:~:text=In%20retrospect%2C%20this%20may%20sound,will%20double%20every%2012%20hours>.
- Stanbury, D. (2021). *The Sea of Unknowing. Using Uncertainty Positively*. University of Huddersfield.

If you are a member of staff from another educational organisation and want to use a limited number of our self-help tools with your students, we'd love to hear from you and share good practice. We'd ask that you retain references to University of Huddersfield as a matter of courtesy and acknowledge the other sources we've used. Thank you.