

Wisdom

Notes, thoughts, observations

Doug Adams Dec 7, 2025



"I think I've acquired some wisdom over the years, but there doesn't seem to be much demand for it."

Wisdom transcends knowledge and intelligence—it requires applying what I know with judgment and purpose. Through experiences, I've learned that wisdom means engaging the world reflectively, morally, and with attention to hidden complexities. Wisdom begins with perspective; it comes with pausing rather than immediately reacting. It requires noticing patterns, anticipating consequences, and seeing nuances in choices. I once equated wisdom with certainty, but now I recognize how much I don't know. Wisdom is ethical at its core - wisdom requires a moral compass—choosing what I ought to do, not just what I can. It means considering how my actions affect others and grounding judgment in empathy. In an age of instant reactions, wisdom feels countercultural but vital. Wisdom isn't something I own but something I strive to achieve.

The OED defines *wisdom* as the “Capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgement in the choice of means and ends; sometimes, less strictly, sound sense, esp. in practical affairs”.

Baltes and Kunzmann (2004) argue that “wisdom” should be understood in two related but distinct ways: (1) *wisdom as a general theory / expert knowledge system* - an abstract account of the knowledge and judgment as excellence of mind and virtue; and (2) *wisdom as everyday realization* - the concrete, observable manifestations of wisdom found in particular people, decisions, and practices. Wisdom as an *expert knowledge system* relates how to manage uncertainty, prioritize conflicting values, integrate concerns, and judge excellence. Wisdom as *everyday realization* relates to where and how wisdom actually appears in individual decisions and personal acts.

Kekes (1983) writes that wisdom, like love or justice, is valuable and the more one has, the better. Its opposite is foolishness. While some have praised folly, they usually critique the confusion of wisdom with mere knowledge or expertise. Erasmus noted that true wisdom is sometimes mistaken for foolishness, while so-called wisdom often just means possessing information. Wisdom is deeply tied to character.



Almond (1997) explores what it means to pursue wisdom in a philosophical sense and why the concept remains both indispensable and difficult to define. She argues that wisdom cannot be reduced to detached intellectual knowledge or technical expertise; instead, it involves a balanced integration of understanding, judgment, and ethical orientation. Almond treats wisdom as a practical and moral capacity—one that guides action, fosters good judgment in uncertain conditions, and connects intellectual insight with human flourishing.



Godlovitch (1981) examines what we really mean when we call someone “wise” and argues that wisdom is a more complex and elusive trait than standard philosophical accounts suggest. He challenges the idea that

wisdom can be reduced to either a set of intellectual abilities or a stock of moral virtues. He emphasizes that wisdom is rare partly because it requires a lifelong process of self-correction, humility, and detachment. It grows out of experience but does not arise automatically from it.

Mitchell (2017) notes that wisdom is rooted in ancient traditions long associated with sound judgment, moral insight, and practical guidance for living well. Modern research shows that contemporary perspectives increasingly view wisdom as an internal capacity shaped by life experience, reflection, empathy, and coping with uncertainty. Cross-cultural studies reveal common elements such as knowledge, compassion, judgment, humility, and openness and that the core of wisdom remains both relevant and developable in the modern world.

Subcomponent	Brief description
1. Social decision making and pragmatic knowledge of life	Social reasoning ability and the ability to give good advice reliant on the development of life knowledge and life skills.
2. Prosocial attitudes and behaviors	Includes such characteristics as empathy, compassion, warmth, altruism, and sense of fairness.
3. Reflection and self-understanding	The ability to introspect, demonstrate insight and intuition, with an emphasis on self-knowledge and awareness.
4. Acknowledgement of and coping effectively with uncertainty	Tolerant of uncertainty and ambiguity.
5. Emotional homeostasis	Affect regulation and self-control.
6. Value relativism and tolerance	Maintaining a non-judgmental stance and accepting the value systems of others.
7. Openness to new experience	Being open to new ideas, experiences, teachings, etc.
8. Spirituality	Spiritual life and an affinity with God.
9. Humor	A potential defense mechanism, recognizing the relevance of humor in conditions of uncertainty and decision making.

Strange (2006) explains that wisdom is a socially constructed, multidimensional concept whose meaning shifts across history and culture but consistently blends deep knowledge with moral virtue. He notes lexical studies and others show that people infer wisdom from a mix of cognitive skill, interpersonal behavior, and demographic cues like age. A social constructionist argues that wisdom is not an objective property, but an ascribed judgment made by evaluators within specific contexts and times.

Table 1

Wisdom Definitions in Lexical Studies: Examples of Typical Characteristics of Wise Persons

	Clayton & Birren (1980)	Hershey & Farrell (1997)	Holliday & Chandler (1986)	Staudinger et al. (1998)	Sternberg (1985)
Cognition/ Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Intelligent – knowledgeable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – intelligent – reflective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – sees the essence of situations – says things that are worth listening to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – thinks carefully before making decisions – shows knowledge about the human nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – is able to take the long view – has a logical mind
Expressive behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – gentle – empathetic – peaceful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – quiet – withdrawn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a good listener – empathic – advisor or mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – is a good listener – knows when to give/ withhold advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – is a good listener – displays concern for others
Age/ Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – aged – experienced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – experienced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – has learned from experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – has learned from experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – experienced – has age, maturity, or long-term experience

Source: https://refubium.fu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/fub188/7243/06_1definingwisdom.pdf?sequence=7&isAllowed=y

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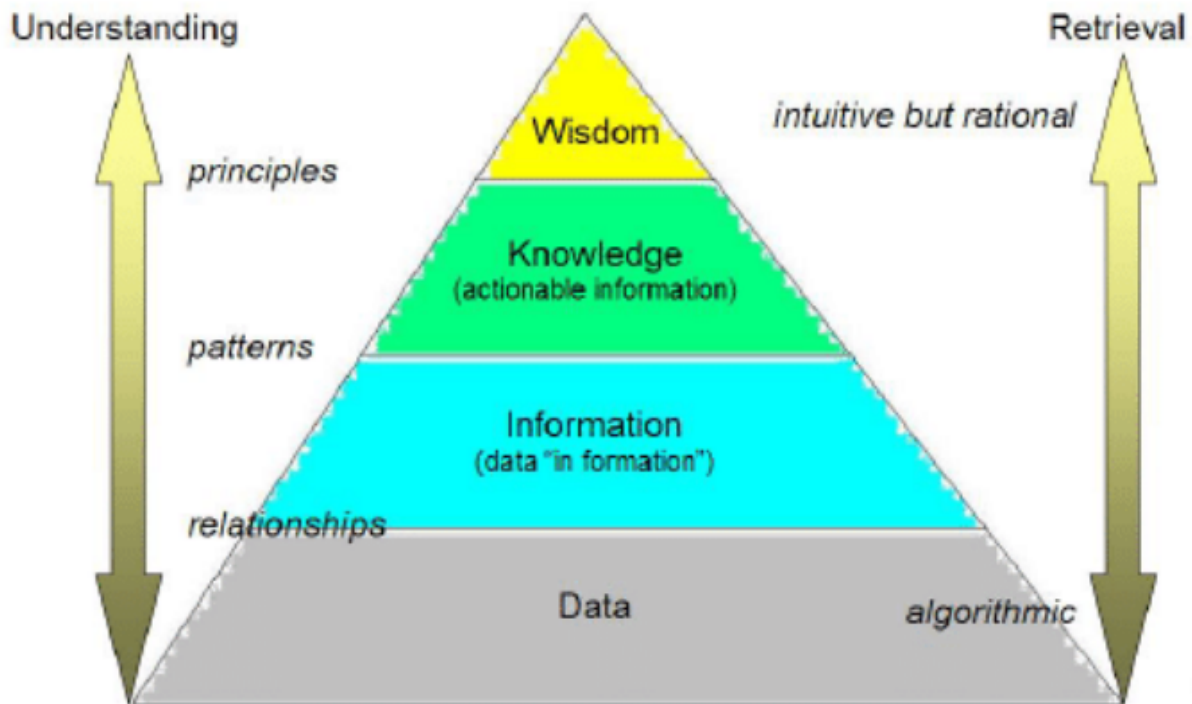
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The DIKW model



Adapted from: Aiyad & Ghaziri and Bellinger, Castro, & Mills

The DIKW (Data, Information, Knowledge, Wisdom) model shows how the human mind can move raw data up to higher planes by progressive organisation. Relationships between data elements enable bits and bytes to gain meaning and thus become informative to us. As we move up the hierarchy, looking for patterns and deploying principles, we impose structure and organization, often by classifying or categorizing the information and knowledge.

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-DIKW-Data-Information-Knowledge-Wisdom-model-shows-how-the-human-mind-can-move_fig1_221437134

Sometimes I see problems and solutions with such clarity, I feel I've been infused with all the wisdom of the ages...
THAT'S when I know I've had too much to drink.

