

Extended essay guidance

The extended essay is a required component of the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma programme. It is an independent, self-directed piece of research written in no more than 4000 words. It is intended to promote high-level research and writing skills, intellectual discovery and creativity. Although most students look towards their higher level subjects for an extended essay idea, there is enormous scope within the Environmental Systems and Societies syllabus for an extended essay. The world studies option explained below further increases this scope.

Objectives of the extended essay

This is the longest and most demanding piece of written work that students are required to complete for the IB diploma. It is designed to provide an opportunity for students to investigate a topic of special interest that is related to one of the student's six diploma programme subjects. The extended essay is viewed as important practical preparation for the type of research and academic writing that students will have to undertake at university.

Through the research process, to satisfy the assessment criteria students should develop the ability to:

- engage in a personal exploration of the topic
- formulate an appropriate research question to define the purpose of the essay; the research question can be formulated as a clearly stated hypothesis
- write a clear and precise introduction that sets the research question or hypothesis in context, and outlines theoretical principles and the geography/history of the location central to the issue under discussion
- show comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the selected topic
- illustrate the capacity to analyse, synthesise and evaluate knowledge
- communicate ideas
- develop reasoned argument and the use of language appropriate to the topic
- show the ability to reach conclusions that are clearly based on all the evidence presented.

It can be easy for students to give insufficient attention to the following three requirements of the extended essay that are very important if a high mark is to be achieved.

- Formal presentation – the requirements are clearly stated in the assessment criteria in the *Environmental systems and societies guide*. Particular attention should be paid to illustrations, which must be appropriately labelled with a figure number, a title and a citation, where appropriate. All illustrations should be placed in the body of the essay, as close as possible to their first reference.
- Abstract – this is a brief summary of the essay which appears at the beginning of the work (following the convention of articles in academic journals).
- Bibliography – this is essentially a list of all the references used to develop the essay. The references should be in alphabetical order according to the author's surname and follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Students should find out the exact requirements for presenting the bibliography from the outset, so that they can build it up as their



research develops, rather than having to retrieve references when they have finished writing – a process which can be both tedious and difficult.

The world studies option

An extended essay can be undertaken in world studies, where students can complete an interdisciplinary analysis of an issue of contemporary global significance across two IB diploma disciplines. Students can reflect on the world today in relation to issues such as the global food crisis, climate change, energy security, and migration. Students should then examine how their selected issue may be illustrated in a local context using specific examples of a small-scale local phenomenon. From this, students can link the local to the global.

Structure and support

Students should be supported throughout the processes of both researching and writing with advice and guidance from a supervisor – usually a teacher at the same educational institution. Each student should meet with their supervisor for a total three to five hours over the duration of the essay; meetings could be, for example, for 30 minutes once a fortnight. Students should be advised to arrive at such meetings with prepared questions, so that they can make the most of the time available.

It is recommended that following the completion of the extended essay, students should have a short concluding interview with the supervisor. This *viva voce* is another excellent preparation for university life.

Assessment

The extended essay is marked according to 11 criteria (summarised above in ‘Objectives of the extended essay’). Students should be given a copy of the assessment criteria.

All extended essays are externally assessed by IB examiners and marked on a scale from 0 to 36. The mark awarded to a student relates to a band. The bands are:

- A – work of an excellent standard
- B – work of a good standard
- C – work of a satisfactory standard
- D – work of a mediocre standard
- E – work of an elementary standard.

Useful resources

The IB has produced a range of support materials for the extended essay. These include:

- *50 More Excellent Extended Essays* – a DVD of essays of A-grade standard covering a wide range of topics
- *Extended Essay Guide* – a free resource found in the online curriculum centre (OCC), which requires a login that is provided to IB World Schools.

Textbooks and internet sources provide useful additional information.

Examples of extended essay titles

Extended essay titles can cover a huge range of topics and issues. The following are just a few titles that merited the top mark band.

- To what extent does deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest affect the survival of the Awa, Yanomami and Akuntse tribes?
- To what extent did the Branksome Green Committee restore the diversity of the Carolinian native species of the Branksome Hall Ravine Woodlot?
- A study of malnourished children in Indonesia and the extent of their recovery after a period of supervised improved nutrition.

Common weaknesses in extended essays

Major weaknesses frequently highlighted by the chief examiners include the following.

- The breadth of the research question could not be properly addressed in the length of the essay.
Students should be careful to set a task that is clearly manageable in terms of the time available for research and the 4000-word allocation. If the investigation is not properly focused, it is likely that the conclusions will be too vague.
- The selection of the topic is too general (e.g. 'Global warming and deforestation').
Such a title reflects major current environmental issues, but is too open ended for an essay at this level.
- Students make superficial arguments and assumptions that the evidence does not support.
- Use of sources is heavily biased towards one side of an argument.
Students should be aware that heavy reliance on sources all presenting a similar view means that the resulting work cannot be considered a piece of scientific analysis. Also, a lot of dubious information is available on the internet.
- Students include illustrations with no commentary or attempt to explain them in context.

Strengths in extended essays

Reports from chief examiners stress that the best essays have a number of things in common.

- The student has a genuine interest in the selected topic.
- There is clear justification of why the topic/issue is worthy of investigation.
- There is good evidence of meaningful background research with good selection of reliable sources of information.
- The investigation contains experimental work or field work. Photographs showing the student undertaking such work are useful. Essays that show clear evidence of valid primary data collection generally produce higher levels of analysis, evaluation and justification.
- Relevant and well-drawn diagrams and sketches are used to illustrate environmental processes. This fits well with the systems approach of the course.
- There is appropriate use of relevant statistical techniques.
- Where personal opinions are stated, these are substantiated with available evidence.



- Clear conclusions are drawn from the analysis undertaken. In a good conclusion, students refer to the research question or the hypothesis derived from it, and state to what extent the question has been answered or the hypothesis supported. Where possible, conclusions are verified by reference to the literature.

Developing an argument

One of the major weaknesses in many extended essays is the failure to develop a 'reasoned and convincing argument' in relation to the research question. Students should aim to develop a logical sequence of argument as their essay progresses, thus building the argument, as far as possible, paragraph by paragraph. The basis of the argument will usually appear at the beginning of the paragraph, followed by evidence to support the assertion(s).

Students might find it useful to imagine they are a barrister addressing a jury at the end of an important case. Points have to be made in a logical and understandable order, building up the case in a steady and convincing manner. Is the argument consistent throughout?

Valid counter-arguments should be given due consideration. What are the reasons for such counter-arguments? Why are they to be rejected? What about the weight of opinion in the secondary resources? How detailed is the expert research or opinion available? Proper consideration of these points should ensure that the arguments are logical, balanced and without bias.

The DVD *50 More Excellent Extended Essays* shows how arguments of a high quality can be developed across a wide range of subjects.