

Subject-specific guidance

Overview

This section covers individual subjects' requirements for the extended essay (EE) in terms of:

- Choice of topic
- Treatment of topic
- Assessment:
 - Criterion A: focus and method
 - Criterion B: knowledge and understanding
 - Criterion C: critical thinking
 - Criterion D: presentation
 - Criterion E: engagement.

It assumes that teachers are already familiar with the EE generic guide and the EE teacher support material, in particular the process whereby students choose a subject area and topic, write their research question and select the research method(s) they will use to explore and answer it.

For a full summary, see the process diagram and the generic assessment criteria.

Or for a quick refresher, read [Extended essay: general requirements](#) .

General requirements

The EE is an in-depth study of a focused topic. It gives students the opportunity to:

- engage in independent research with intellectual initiative, creativity and rigour
- develop research, thinking, self-management and communication skills
- reflect on what they have learned throughout the research and writing process.

All students must:

- provide a logical and coherent rationale for their choice of topic
- review what has already been written about the topic
- formulate a clear research question
- offer a concrete description of the methods they use to investigate the question
- generate reasoned interpretations and conclusions based on their reading and independent research in order to answer the question.

Choice of topic

See also *Initial guidance on research and writing*

Students first need to identify the broad area of inquiry they are interested in.

Sources of ideas may include:

- work already undertaken as part of the course
- preliminary reading of academic journals and reputable scholarly e-resources, eg conference papers, essays, book chapters or journal articles. A school librarian can advise on this
- conversations with teachers, fellow students and librarians.

Literature review

Students should try to read as much as they can of what has already been written about their topic. Time spent on a literature review early on in the research process will guide and improve their work. It will help them to:

- contextualize their research question and subsequent findings
- meet criterion B: demonstrating knowledge and understanding .

While conducting their literature review, students may find it useful to compile an annotated bibliography and to record their responses to what they read in their researcher's reflection space (RRS).

If using the internet, students are encouraged to use specialized academic search engines that will find resources appropriate for citation in the EE.

Students must be aware of their responsibilities to cite properly the resources they use and to check their work for plagiarism. Their citations should adhere to [the requirements of the IB](#) and be consistently applied.

Research question

Students should identify a **working** research question early on but be prepared to change, eg if too little information is available to permit the intended investigation.

Students should be guided by the idea that what they are writing is important because:

- it seeks to fill a gap in understanding their chosen topic, or
- it offers a resolution to some controversial argument.

The research question should therefore be non-trivial and follow from the existing body of literature on the topic. It must be:

- specific, sharply focused and capable of being answered within a 4,000-word essay
- stated clearly in the introduction of the essay and on the title page
- related to the chosen topic.

Students need to avoid researching questions that are too narrow or too obvious as this will limit their ability to formulate reasoned arguments.

Their answer to the question must be analytical rather than descriptive.

Title

The title is a formal requirement on the title page of the essay. If the title is missing, it will be considered on balance with the other formal requirements against criterion D. While there is no explicit penalty in criterion A, the title will help address the requirements as it expands on the student's intended focus. Without a title, students lose an opportunity to clarify their focus.

Treatment of the topic

Once students have identified their topic and written their research question, they can decide how to research their answer. They may find it helpful to write a statement outlining their broad approach.

The definition of "research" and terms such as "primary data" and "secondary data" varies from subject to subject.

In some subjects, students must use both primary and secondary data. In others, students may, or even must, rely exclusively on secondary data.

However, all students must carry out secondary research in terms of a literature review for their topic.

Two important reminders

1. Undertaking an extended essay is a challenge. Planning is crucial. Students need to start writing their papers early and discuss any emerging difficulties with their supervisor. As well as their supervisors, librarians are a great source of information, advice and support for students.
2. Students risk their diploma if found guilty of academic misconduct:

Individuals and societies

Individuals and societies

An extended essay (EE) in individuals and societies is intended for students who are interested in undertaking research in an area of business management, economics, geography, global politics, history, ITGS, philosophy, psychology, social and cultural anthropology or world religions.

The individuals and societies EE is intended to encourage the systematic and critical study of:

- human experience and behaviour
- physical, economic and social environments
- the history and development of social and cultural institutions.

Students' choice of topic should enable them to recognize that the content and methodologies of the subjects are contestable and that their study requires critical thinking.

Students must have sufficient grounding in the subject under which they submit their essay: reading a textbook or consulting an encyclopedia while writing the EE will not compensate for a lack of proper background knowledge.

For a longer general introduction to the subject areas of individual societies see [Individuals and societies: An introduction](#)

Economics: Subject-specific guidance

See also: EE generic guide and EE teacher support material.

Overview

An extended essay (EE) in economics provides students with an opportunity to:

- undertake in-depth research in economics in an area of personal interest to them
- develop research skills
- apply economic theory to real-world situations
- make inferences based on real-world data
- analyse and evaluate the outcomes of their research.

The outcome of the research should be a coherent and structured analytical essay that effectively addresses the particular research question.

Choice of topic

Students can choose a topic within any of the syllabus sections in the current *Economics guide*, but they are not restricted to these.

Use of economic theories, models and tools

Students should undertake an essay that uses the principles of economics as a basis for researching a particular topic. They may take a recent economic event, issue or policy, gather data and apply economic theories, models and tools to evaluate it.

Research questions that do not allow a systematic and meaningful investigation using economic theory and do not require critical analysis and detailed understanding are unlikely to be suitable in economics.

Multidisciplinary topics

It is essential that students answer the question using economic theories and concepts, and that the work does not diverge into another subject area. Some topics can be approached through different disciplines, such as business management, geography or psychology. Students must therefore ensure they use economic theories, models and tools and meet the subject requirements of economics.

Alternatively, if students wish to approach a topic from the perspective of economics and another discipline within the Diploma Programme, they can undertake an interdisciplinary World Studies EE.

Five-year rule

Topics should not be historical. They should relate to economic information, policies, outcomes or events that are no more than approximately five years old. Topics that are too retrospective, such as “What was the impact of the global financial crisis on unemployment in the United States from 2007–2010?” almost invariably become descriptive.

Essays should also not be based on future economic events. For example, “What will be the effect of the 2026 Football World Cup on the economy of Country X?” would not be suitable as it would be entirely speculative and unsupported.

Opportunities for analysis

The topic chosen should provide opportunities for some critical analysis of the information that is gathered. Students should avoid topics that depend entirely on summarizing secondary data, as they tend to lead to an essay that is essentially narrative or descriptive in nature.

Restricting the scope of the essay is necessary to ensure a clear focus, and will also provide opportunities for demonstrating detailed understanding of economics and critical analysis.

Suitable areas of economics

Macroeconomics topics may be chosen, but it is essential that the research question is narrowed to a reasonable focus on a particular part of the economy and is **not** on the economy as a whole.

Topics researching economic development are highly suitable, but the research question should relate to a particular aspect of development or a limited area. It would not be suitable, for example, to examine the effect of some government policy on the development of the whole economy.

Examples of topics

These examples are for guidance only. Students must ensure that their choice of topic is focused (left-hand column) rather than broad (right-hand column).

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Focused topics	Broad topics
The effect of the recent imposition of a minimum wage in Austria on unemployment in the fast food industry in Graz	The effect of the minimum wage on unemployment in Austria
The effect of a fall in the exchange rate of the US dollar and its effect on the tourist industry in Carmel, California	How the fall in the exchange rate of the US dollar affected the US economy
The economic effect of water privatization on the farming industry in my region of Zambia	How the privatization of water affected Zambia

Treatment of the topic

Research question

Choosing a research question that is made up of more than one question (a “double-barrelled” research question) is unlikely to result in a successful essay—eg “Does Company X practice monopolistic behaviours and, if so, how does it help the firm to increase revenues” or “What is the effect of European interest rate policy on aggregate demand in Greece and what should the government do to increase aggregate demand?”

In the first example, the answer to the first part of the question must be affirmative in order to proceed with the essay. If not, the second part of the question cannot be answered.

In the second example, the scope of the essay is simply too wide.

The answer to the research question should not be self-evident. There must be scope to research the question and weave together an argument that is not obvious from the outset. For example, “To what extent is the market for mobile phone service in Country X an oligopoly” would not be appropriate when it is obviously an oligopoly as there are only three firms.

Research methods

Students can base their essay solely on secondary sources. They can also choose to undertake primary research.

Secondary sources

Students should consult a good range of secondary resources, including:

- economics textbooks
- general economics books
- research from think tanks such as the OECD or the New Economics Foundation
- government publications
- publications from international organizations such as the World Bank or UN bodies
- newspaper and magazine articles.

Primary research

For certain topics, primary research may enhance the approach, including:

- interviews
- surveys
- questionnaires.

Interviews with experts (face-to-face, virtual or electronic) in a given topic can be very beneficial, for example:

- university lecturers
- journalists
- government officials
- business people.

Where students undertake primary research, they must approach it in an academic manner.

- They must construct any surveys or questionnaires so that they gather meaningful, relevant data.
- Sample sizes must be large enough to generate statistically significant results.

When students have carried out surveys or questionnaires, they must:

- explain the process in their essay (How many people? Who? Where?)
- summarize and analyse the relevant results.

Pages of pie charts summarizing survey results are rarely appropriate.

Questionnaires based on speculative, anecdotal responses rarely, if ever, generate appropriate data and should not be used.

Use of theory

Students should integrate relevant economic theories, models and tools with the evidence obtained by the research throughout the essay. The theory should not be presented as a separate section. An essay that delivers the theory as a separate section of the essay and does not apply it to the specific research question is unlikely to be successful in terms of analysis.

Students should never make assertions using economic theories, models and tools if they cannot meaningfully link these theories to their case study with supporting data or evidence.

Students can demonstrate their skills of analysis and evaluation by judging the extent to which a theory is valid or useful in answering the research question.

Examples of topics, research questions and suggested approaches

Once students have identified their topic and written their research question, they can decide how to research their answer. They may find it helpful to write a statement outlining their broad approach. These examples are for guidance only.

Topic	Policy of plain cigarette packaging in reducing the negative externalities of cigarette consumption in Country X
Research question	How effective has Country X's policy of plain cigarette packaging been in reducing the negative externalities associated with the consumption of cigarettes in Country X?
Approach	<p>Theory to be researched in depth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative externalities of consumption. <p>Data to be gathered through secondary research (medical data, government data, newspaper articles):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External costs associated with smoking before the policy. • Changes in external costs since the policy. • Information concerning the government's reasoning/objectives. • Information concerning changes in consumption of cigarettes. <p>Possible primary research:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys/questionnaires to try to assess the extent to which consumption patterns were affected, trying to divide the market into different categories: long-term smokers, shorter-term smokers, young people who may be influenced before taking up smoking. • Interview with a government official, health economist or newspaper reporter covering the issue.
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Topic	Company X's abuse of monopoly power in the fast food industry of Country Y
Research question	To what extent does Company X abuse its monopoly power in the fast food industry in Country Y?
Approach	<p>Theory to be researched in depth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive and negative outcomes associated with monopoly power. <p>Data to be gathered through secondary (or primary) research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive "behaviours" of Company X in terms of pricing, innovation, corporate social responsibility in Country Y. • Negative "behaviours" of Company X in terms of pricing, lack of innovation, anti-competitive behaviour in Country Y. • Articles in the newspapers about company activity. <p>Possible primary research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with customers to ascertain consumer satisfaction. • Email questions to representative of the country's competition commission to gather information about the company's competitive behaviour.

Topic	Relationship between the official inflation rate of Country Y and wages of international school teachers in City X
Research question	To what extent has the official inflation rate offered an accurate way to adjust the wages of international school teachers in City X over the past four years?
Approach	<p>Theory to be researched in depth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is inflation calculated in Country Y? • What are the limitations to the accuracy of official inflation figures? <p>Data to be gathered through secondary research:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Composition/weighting of Country Y's consumer price index (CPI). • Changes in the country Y's CPI in the period in question. <p>Possible primary research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview with an HR representative of an international school in City X on how wages are determined; in particular, what is the role of the CPI? • Surveys/questionnaires to determine the weighting of items in an "average" international school teacher's basket of goods and services.
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Topic	Impact of mobile telephones on economic development in Country Y's Market Town X
Research question	How has the increased use of mobile telephones contributed to economic development in a developing country market town?
Approach	<p>Theory to be researched in depth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theories of economic development. • Characteristics associated with economic development. • The theoretical advantages of the use of mobile phones in developing countries. <p>Data to be gathered through secondary research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges in the functioning of markets in Country Y prior to availability of mobile technology (NGO reports). • The ways in which mobile phones have changed the functioning of markets in Country Y and Market Town X (NGO reports, newspaper articles). <p>Possible primary research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with local market traders on how mobile phones have changed their ability to conduct business.

Topic	Relationship between taxation of high-emission cars and purchases of low-emission cars in Country X
Research question	To what extent has the recent (within the past three years) change to the indirect taxes on high-emission cars influenced buying of low-emission cars in Country X?
Approach	<p>Theory to be researched in depth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory of market failure in the context of car emissions: negative externalities of consumption and ways of remedying these; in particular, indirect taxes. • High-emission cars and low-emission cars as substitutes.

Data to be gathered through secondary research:

- Supporting evidence of the external costs of car emissions (government documents, newspaper articles, publications from environmental groups).
- The extent to which the change in the tax policy was due to the goal of reducing emissions (government documents, newspaper articles).
- Data on the numbers of low-emission cars sold before and after the tax policy.

Possible primary research:

- Interviews with managers of car dealerships on their views on the taxation change.
- Interviews with new car buyers on their rationale for choosing a particular car.

An important note on “double-dipping”

Students must ensure that their EE does not overlap significantly with any other work they are submitting for the Diploma Programme. For example, the data gathered for an economics EE should not be used to fulfil the requirements of internal assessment tasks in other subjects.

The economics EE and internal assessment

The internal assessment task (IA)—a portfolio of commentaries—may give students ideas for topics to research in depth, but the EE is not an extension of this task.

Students must ensure that they understand the clear distinction between the IA and the EE:

- Both allow students to apply economic theory to a particular real-world situation, but the IA is anchored in specific articles in the news media.
- In the EE, the student’s topic and research question determine which economic theory it is relevant to explore; in the IA commentaries, the articles decide this.
- Both use secondary sources, but there is no expectation in the IA to consult sources beyond the specific news articles.
- There is no expectation of primary research in the IA.
- The tighter word limit of each IA commentary means that the 4,000-word EE is a study of much greater depth and breadth.

Supervisors play an important role in guiding students on these distinctions. Students risk their diploma if academic misconduct is found.

Interpreting the EE assessment criteria

Criterion A: Focus and method

(Strands: Topic, Research question, Methodology)