



How to Facilitate the Extended Essay

Guiding your students through the writing
process and helping them to succeed



The Extended Essay is one of the core components of the IB Diploma, along with the CAS and Theory of Knowledge. It provides candidates with the opportunity to carry out a major piece of inquiry and produce a formal piece of writing that is focused on a topic of their choice. The topic should be one that genuinely interests them and allows them to research it in depth. Successfully completing this piece of research and writing is one of the big milestones in a student's journey through the IB Diploma. It can also be an important reference point in university applications and interviews for courses. This May, it was one of the pieces of work that was submitted and marked in a year without formal exams. It could be an important factor in a university's selection of students.

Here are a few thoughts about the role of the supervisor of the Extended Essay and the importance of formal meetings with students. These meetings are essential in helping the students to frame their reflections on their research (Criterion E of the Extended Essay assessment). Based on observations both as a supervisor and an examiner of the Extended Essay, this is an area that students struggle with. It will be suggested that the TOK framework (**which looks at scope, methods, perspectives and ethical responsibilities**) can play a key role in helping students to reflect.

What is the role of the supervisor?

1. The supervisor should really have a background in the student's chosen subject. They should know whether the topic fits within the **scope** of the discipline.
2. They should have knowledge and understanding of the **marking criteria** for the essay and share these with the student.
3. They should have an understanding of the **methodologies** appropriate to the discipline.

4. They should provide **guidance and feedback** to the student about the research process and the tone of writing needed for an academic paper.
5. They should help the student to understand the need to consider **different perspectives** in their research.
6. They should remind the students of their **ethical responsibilities** as a researcher. (In these six key points, I have emphasised the importance of applying the TOK framework to their research – a link that should be made explicitly to students.)
7. The supervisor is expected to hold three formal meetings with the students. We shall discuss the significance of these meetings in the rest of the blog.

How can the formal meetings with the supervisor help the student?

One of the requirements of the Extended Essay is that the student should have three formal meetings with their supervisor and be able to reflect on their research process. This proves to be one of the requirements of the Extended Essay that students struggle with, so we shall have a look at what students could reflect on and how it could help their progress. I am going to draw on an example from a history essay (created by the author, not drawn from any candidate's essay) that is focused on the Arakan campaign in Burma during World War 2 (1942–44). The purpose is to look at reflection that could have taken place during each of the three meetings.



A picture of the commandos landing on the Burmese coastline in the Arakan campaign (Wikimedia commons)

What type of reflection could we expect from the first meeting with the supervisor?

This meeting is often held a few weeks after the student has been allocated his/her supervisor, and typically they will have chosen a topic. The reflection will describe their motivation for the essay and describe some of the sources that they will have researched.

The reflection could be as follows:

My uncle was a doctor in the Arakan campaign. My interest was further spiked by a BBC documentary about a West African soldier who fought there - I have emailed the BBC to see if I can contact him directly. There was an excellent book on this campaign by the historian Jim Holland, a biography of General Slim, and I found some letters home from my uncle. Having read these, I think that there are key issues to examine - one was the role of supplies to both armies, and the other was about the leadership of General Slim and how that transformed the campaign. Supply chains to armies are a key part of any military campaign and this seems to have been a challenge for the Japanese army, which relied on taking Allied supplies, whereas the British under General Snelling seem to have been better supplied. My supervisor has encouraged me to narrow down the topic to get a good research question and to try to access some material on the Japanese side. (174 words)



Why is the second meeting so important?

The second meeting with the supervisor is crucial, as it should be at the point when the student has narrowed down their research topic to a good research question. Moreover, it should be prior to completing their research and writing a draft. A good research question is the key to a good piece of research. The supervisor should have some experience of the subject in order to advise the students appropriately. For this second meeting, a strong recommendation is to get the student to use the Knowledge Framework from the Theory of Knowledge to help clarify their research plans and the methodology they intend to use to pursue them. Continuing with the example from the Arakan campaign, here are some thoughts about how the Knowledge Framework might be applied:

Research Question: To what extent did General Slim's appointment as Chief of Staff to the East Asian theatre lead to victory in the Arakan campaign?

● Scope

We are trying to establish what the truth is about the Arakan campaign from a uniquely historical viewpoint. It is clear that this is a historical piece of research.

● Methodology

This will involve examining biographies of Slim and books about the Arakan campaign. In addition, I shall be able to draw on personal letters and letters from General Snelling and my uncle. I also hope to be able to arrange some Zoom interviews with veterans of the campaign. (Criteria A and C)

A knowledge question that arises from this: How much can we rely on the validity of personal accounts to reveal the truth in history?

● Perspectives

There are a number of different views to consider: biographers of Slim, military historians on both the Allied and Japanese sides, and eyewitness accounts. A major concern will be on the validity and reliability.

(Criteria B and C)

● Ethics

A major issue in my research is to quote accurately and not misrepresent people's positions. It will be important to share my findings and my final essay with providers of personal documents and interviews.

(Criteria D and E)

Having clarified the research process, the student should have received some critical feedback on their research plans and this should be apparent in their reflection.

A reflection based on this presentation might be:

The research question has now been focused down to: "To what extent did General Slim's appointment as Chief of Staff to the East Asian theatre lead to victory in the Arakan campaign?" This research question will allow for a thorough examination of the role of the individual in deciding history. From the preliminary research carried out so far, it would appear that Slim's personal skills were very important in appointing effective subordinates, gaining equipment needed, and ensuring that men were better prepared. However, it would also appear that the Japanese overestimated

their ability to obtain supplies. This is an area that needs further exploration. A problem that is faced is getting original documents about the Japanese leadership and tactics; this will be important for a balanced view of the campaign. My supervisor stresses the importance of presenting a balanced view of the campaign and Slim's role in it. He advises caution in how I use the personal documents I have, not letting them dictate my research. (166 words)



What should we expect from the student after the viva voce?

The third reflection is to be carried out after the viva voce is completed and the essay has been completed and handed in. It is meant to be evaluative of the whole research process and reflect what the student has learnt about both the topic and how to carry out research in their chosen subject area. In addition, it is expected to demonstrate some conceptual understanding.

In a history essay, a consideration has to be the role of validity and reliability of sources in discovering the truth.

This is a reflection which the student could have written about the Arakan campaign research:

The conclusion drawn from the research was that Slim's appointment definitely led to a change in fortunes. My own work was focused too much on Slim's personal qualities - which were certainly significant, in

particular selecting the right people to support him. I was influenced by personal correspondence of my uncle and this raised questions about their reliability - a key issue in history. Consequently, the role of Mountbatten in being able to hold sway with Churchill in acquiring supplies for the armies was underestimated. In addition, there should have been greater consideration given to the frailties of the Japanese equipment and extended supply lines, which ultimately affected their campaign. Unfortunately, I was unable to get access to Japanese sources about this. A historian has to be able to balance opinions well and not be swayed by personal prejudices in trying to discover the historical truth about an issue. I look forward to carrying out more research in history. (159 words)



In total, the reflections are 499 words (one less than the 500-word limit for the three reflections).

What significance does the supervisor's comments have?

The supervisor's comments about the student's performance have to be read by the examiner. It is interesting for examiners to read these, as it helps them to triangulate their opinions of the student's understanding of the research process. The comments should have the following traits:

1. The supervisor should be honest about the student and their commitment to the research process.

2. The supervisor should indicate any issues the student may have had with their research. (However, this should not digress into the life history of the student.)
3. The supervisor should give some indication about how receptive the student was to advice during the research process.
4. The supervisor should give some indication of how the student has developed in terms of organisation, writing ability and the ability to acknowledge sources of information.
5. The supervisor should describe the student's personal motivation about the topic.
6. The supervisor should not recommend a grade for the essay in their comments.

Example comments about this essay might be:

The candidate had an uncle that served in the Arakan campaign and was keen to write about it. He did some research including using some correspondence from his uncle and then was able to narrow down his research question. I indicated to him that he must be careful about giving too much emphasis to personal documents – as while they are valid, they don't always give us a reliable picture of a whole situation. The candidate was diligent in his research and did his best to access Japanese documentation and was given some help by Professor Nakhira of the University with translation. He clearly learnt from his first draft, as he had some issues about his organisation and referencing that were dealt with in the final essay. Overall, a good piece of research from a diligent student.

References

Extended Essay Guide (2018). IB Publications, Geneva

Theory of Knowledge Guide (2020). IB Publications, Geneva

Please note: the essay title and reflections were created by the author and not based on any actual Extended Essay from the IBO.





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