

## Interdisciplinary essays

### Interdisciplinary essays

An interdisciplinary extended essay (EE) gives students an opportunity to undertake an in-depth and independent investigation into a topic of their choice that considers the relationship between subjects and allows for meaningful connections to be made in relation to their chosen area of research.

For a longer general introduction to undertaking an EE in an interdisciplinary subject area, see [Interdisciplinary essays: An introduction](#).

# World Studies: Subject-specific guidance

See also: EE generic guide and EE teacher support materials and the IB world studies extended essay process video.

## Overview

An EE in world studies gives students the opportunity to undertake an interdisciplinary study of an issue of contemporary global significance.

“Interdisciplinary” in this context refers to research that draws on the methods, concepts and theories of two Diploma Programme subjects. It is strongly recommended that students are undertaking a course of study in at least one of the subjects chosen for their essay.

“Contemporary” in this context refers to events that took place during the student’s lifetime.

Students are required to

- identify an issue of global importance
- identify a local manifestation of the issue of global importance
- develop a clear rationale for taking an interdisciplinary approach and use the conceptual framework and vocabulary of two Diploma Programme subjects.

This provides an opportunity for students to conduct independent interdisciplinary research (not necessarily primary research) that draws on Diploma Programme subjects and integrates them to produce a coherent and insightful analysis of the global issue they choose to investigate.

It should be noted that law and education are not Diploma Programme subjects.

World studies EEs are registered in one of six areas of study: these are not the same as the Diploma Programme subjects. They are:

- Conflict, peace and security
- Culture, language and identity
- Environmental and/or economic sustainability
- Equality and inequality
- Health and development
- Science, technology and society.

The interdisciplinary essay is designed to provide students with the opportunity to:

- engage in, and pursue, a systematic process of research appropriate to the topic—a process that is informed by knowledge, concepts, theories, perspectives and methods from two chosen subjects
- develop research and communication skills—including the ability to communicate with readers who have a background in more than one subject or discipline

- develop the skills of creative and critical thinking—particularly those skills involved in integrating concepts, theories, perspectives, findings or examples from different subjects to develop new insights or understandings
- experience the excitement of intellectual discovery—including insights into how different subjects complement or challenge one another when used to address the same topic or issue.

Furthermore, in line with the *IB's mission*, the world studies EE seeks to advance students' emerging global consciousness. This comprises:

- a sensitivity to local phenomena as manifestations of broader developments on the planet
- the capacity to think in flexible and informed ways in understanding issues of global significance
- a developing perception of the student's own identity (self) as a global actor and member of humanity, capable of making a positive contribution to the world

## Choice of topic

Many topics are potentially suitable for a world studies EE. The chosen topic must:

- address an issue of global significance
- invite an interdisciplinary approach.

The most successful topics reveal connections between specific or local places, people, phenomena or experiences and the larger global framework in which they take place.

Topics must invite a critical examination of the issue in light of relevant theories, methods and arguments in two subjects.

When choosing a topic, students should remember that it must encourage analysis and evaluation rather than description, unsupported generalizations and value judgments.

Students must also ensure that they can meet the various assessment criteria within the 4,000-word limit. They should avoid topics that are too broad in scope to permit an in-depth study within the word limit. A limited topic thoroughly researched and with a clear focus is preferable to a broad topic that can only be examined superficially.

## Examples of topics

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

✓	✗
Focused topics	Broad topics
The sustainability of high-speed rail travel in China: the case of the Beijing–Tianjin high-speed railway line	Sustainability and rail travel
How street art helped to transform black South African communities during apartheid	Theatre and disadvantaged communities

✓	✗
Focused topics	Broad topics
An examination of the extent to which subsistence farmers in the Himalayan foothills are influenced by short-term economic motivations and long-term environmental sustainability in determining their farming practices	Subsistence farming in the Himalayas
The extent to which the policies of the Thai government have prohibited the Karen ethnic group from progressing alongside the rest of Thai society	Government policies that lead to inequality

Students may use journalistic or visual material, interviews or data from the internet, but their EEs should not be based solely on such sources. Students should display a knowledge and understanding of relevant theories, research methods or findings in the selected Diploma Programme subjects.

## Treatment of the topic

Students should craft a specific research question that is:

- interesting to them
- challenging
- sufficiently narrow to allow them to examine an issue in depth
- manageable within 4,000 words.

The question should also require the student to collect or generate information and/or data for analysis and evaluation.

## Local case study

The local case study can have a number of functions:

- It may illustrate a local manifestation of the issues of global importance.
- It may offer an opportunity to explore the complexities of the issue in a manageable way.
- It may document “best practices” and offer lessons beyond the local focus.

Occasionally, students may choose to compare two local manifestations or examples from different contexts.

## Subject knowledge

It is expected that students will have a good grounding in at least one of the Diploma Programme subjects used in the EE.

If they are unfamiliar with a discipline used, they must access its syllabus so that they can identify the concepts, terminology and modes of thinking required for their EE. (Many IB syllabuses contain lists of key concepts.)

### **Important note on using studies in language and literature or language acquisition**

If a student wishes to use studies in language and literature or language acquisition as one of the subject areas to explore their contemporary global issue then this should be done from either the perspective of literature or language. When indicating which subjects have been used, students only need to indicate: **literature and psychology** or **language and film**.

Given that world studies extended essays may only be submitted in English, French or Spanish if a student wishes to use language as one of their disciplines for exploring a global issue then they must do so in the context of how the language may affect an understanding of that global issue. For example, they may be interested in exploring attitudes to refugees in Germany and choose to examine how the German language may influence perceptions using newspaper reports, etc. The essay however, will be written in English.

The student's supervisor should be qualified to give advice in at least one of the subjects used by the student. If other subjects are touched upon in the essay and there are appropriate specialists available in the school, students are encouraged to consult them about research, concepts and approaches.

However, each student must only have one main supervisor who takes on the role as outlined in the introduction to this guide.

## Researcher's reflection space

The researcher's reflection space (RRS) is strongly recommended as part of the world studies EE process. It provides a space for candid reflection on the issue being studied and how it relates to a student's own world view, values and aspirations as global citizens.

The RRS gives students an opportunity to reflect on their work and its progress and reversals in personally meaningful ways. It can take the form of a notebook or a blog.

It is created by students to:

- record notes on their readings
- gather topic-related media clips
- paste selected and marked readings
- reflect upon interviews, data and emerging findings.

Most importantly, it is a space where students can reflect candidly upon their own views and lifestyles, feelings, values, aspirations and commitments as global citizens in relation to the topic under study.

The world studies EE offers an opportunity for students to develop their global consciousness. The RRS is the place where particular moments of such development are documented, enabling students to reflect upon and deepen their personal connections to the problems under study and gain an insight into whether, or how, learning about contemporary world issues informs their values, beliefs or commitments in this key phase of their lives. The best examples of RRS exhibit students' ongoing realization and reflection upon who they are as local, regional and global actors.

The RRS is a document for the student. Students may choose to share a section of the space with their teachers in preparation for a meeting. Supervisors may assign focused reflection tasks for students to include in their space but, fundamentally, this is a student-led space to be owned by the students.

It is intended that a well-planned RRS should arise naturally out of the research process and should not involve any extra work.

Before providing examples of typical world studies EE layouts for guidance, it is worth considering some pitfalls to avoid. These include essays that:

- rely on basic information from the internet and everyday common sense rather than employing concepts, theories and findings from Diploma Programme subjects
- merely juxtapose theories, methods and findings from different subjects without any attempt to show how they come together to address the topic in a new or compelling way
- do not make clear the underlying Diploma Programme subjects or justify the subjects chosen
- do not give a strong sense of why the inquiry is important and how it links with a global issue but merely offer a description of the problem under study
- define the problem too broadly, given the 4,000-word limit for the essay, and therefore offer a superficial account.

The examples of world studies EEs below are intended as guidance only. They illustrate that multifaceted questions should be encouraged rather than broad ones.

In each case the essay title provides a sharp focus on an issue of global significance. The research question further articulates the focus of the study.

Topic	<b>Culture, language and identity: an investigation exploring influences of assimilation on contemporary indigenous music and cultural identity</b>
Research question	To what extent has the Norwegianization of Sami culture changed the significance of "joik" as an expression of Sami identity through the modernization of the music?
Approach	By investigating this topic on a local scale and linking it to broader patterns of global indigenous assimilation, the essay examines the consequences of the Norwegianization of the Sami people. Framed within an interdisciplinary approach, referring to social and cultural anthropology and global politics, the essay applies key concepts of both DP subjects and draws from secondary sources and ethnographic interviews as primary data. An integrative synthesis sheds light on this issue of global significance.

Topic	<b>Health and development: multiple sclerosis and latitude</b>
Research question	To what extent do geographical factors play a role in the distribution of multiple sclerosis cases in Canada and Iran?
Approach	The essay challenges the suggested theory that MS is associated with high latitudes by looking at recent studies of Iran. Genetic factors and vitamin deficiency (biology), migration and environment (geography) are evaluated to enhance understanding

Topic	<b>Health and development: economic growth and obesity</b>
Research question	How has globalization contributed to dietary changes and obesity in developed and developing countries?
Approach	The essay considers metabolic systems and the role of the endocrine system (biology) and recent qualitative and quantitative changes in diet in Liberia, Brazil and the USA to measure energy imbalance and a nutrition transition resulting from globalization (geography/economics).

## An important note on “double-dipping”

Students must ensure that their EE does not duplicate other work they are submitting for the Diploma Programme. For example, any data, material or research used in the submission of an assessment task for another subject must not be used in the completion of a world studies EE.

**Supervisors play an important role in guiding students in this. Students risk their diploma if academic misconduct is detected.**

## Interpreting the EE assessment criteria

### Criterion A: Focus and method

(Strands: Topic, Research question, Methodology)

The student should identify an issue (topic) of global significance and examine it through one or more local manifestations.

The significance and importance of the global issue must be established in the introduction (this might take rather longer than in other subjects).

In this way the issue is accurately and effectively communicated.

The research question should appropriately connect the global issue to the local manifestation. Early in the essay, students should:

- explain or justify their research question
- identify the IB academic disciplines and appropriate key concepts they are going to use
- explain why the research question requires an interdisciplinary approach and indicate the benefits of an integrative approach
- highlight the materials, sources, data and evidence from the two subjects they will be using, with some explanation of why they have been chosen.

Students must show clearly that they have chosen a suitable range of relevant sources. These could be primary or secondary.

Primary sources include:

- works of art
- film
- music