

## Interdisciplinary essays: An introduction

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 example, in literature and performance, students focus on the nature of the relationships that occur between a chosen text and its adaptation for performance; in world studies an issue of contemporary global significance is explored through the lenses of two subjects; and in environmental systems and societies the interaction and integration of natural environmental systems and human societies are explored.

Students undertaking one of these options must demonstrate a solid understanding of their area of research, taking a fully integrated approach. This examination must be shown in the form of:

- a coherently written and structured essay that effectively addresses an area of research, taking an interdisciplinary approach
- bringing together concepts, methods and approaches from across different subjects
- the development and exploration of an area of study specifically appropriate to the interdisciplinary choice.

The most critical stage in preparing for the EE is the formulation of a logical and coherent rationale for selecting a particular topic for the extended essay, a topic that offers enough scope to provide material for a substantial essay, and the development of ideas around the topic and research question that examine existing views and argue against them.

## The process of topic selection

Students should initially identify the broad area of inquiry that is of interest in one of the interdisciplinary options: environmental systems and societies, literature and performance or world studies.

If students choose to undertake an essay in environmental systems and societies, their motivation may well be the result of a concern or interest in particular local or global issues that relate to the environment. The chosen topic must allow for the use of theories and methods that facilitate the exploration of both the natural environmental systems and human societies. In this respect, a systems approach is considered particularly effective, and students will be expected to show some employment of this approach in the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered.

For students undertaking a literature and performance EE, their chosen topic must focus on the transformation of one form to another.

Within a world studies EE, 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. Owing to the composite nature of contemporary global issues, the world studies EE is ideal for students who want to explore these issues by drawing on theories, findings and methods of two Diploma Programme subjects, integrating them to produce a coherent and insightful analysis of the issue they have chosen to investigate. The topic may relate to a particular area within a subject, but this is not a requirement.

The most important aspect of topic selection is that it should reflect the student's particular interest and enthusiasm within the subject area. Some of the recommended topics for exploration may examine issues such as the global food crisis, climate change, ecology and its impact, terrorism, energy security, migration, global health, technology and cultural exchange.

When examining a broader topic of inquiry, a student will need to narrow down the topic to a research question that allows for specificity and detail. In addition, the research question needs to allow for the investigation to make a purposeful contribution to knowledge and understanding within the subject or about the issue being researched.

After a careful analysis of a topic and its selection, a student may start working on designing a coherently written paper.

Often their previous experiences help students to decide on their topic.

For some, the inspiration might be work already undertaken as part of the course. For a world studies EE, students may be stimulated by their CAS activities or by local or global issues they have engaged with through the news.

Students might also consult e-resources, textbooks, databases and reference guides when searching for an appropriate topic.

## **Literature review—demonstrating knowledge and understanding in context**

Conducting literature-based research is an essential element of the EE. Students should review the existing literature on the selected topic to inform the construction of their own research question and design. Students need to spend time on their literature review (eg by compiling an annotated bibliography) so that they can contextualize their own work. The review will also help them meet criterion B: knowledge and understanding.

Once they have discussed their choice of topic with their supervisor, students can start drawing up a research plan for their EE. This plan should be flexible enough to allow them to explore the topic in a creative manner. Students should not be afraid to take risks throughout the research process: originality is encouraged, as is the use of a number of different research models.

Students of a world studies EE are encouraged to include a brief overview as to how the research question links the local and global through a local manifestation of a global issue.

## Research question

In designing a research question, students should mainly be guided by their interests, but they should also consider the relevance of their research.

The research question should be non-trivial and follow from the existing body of literature on the topic, seeking to explore it in innovative ways. The question needs to be specific and sharply focused, stated clearly on the title page and in the introduction of the essay, and fit clearly with the interdisciplinary area chosen (environmental systems and societies, literature and performance or world studies).

In environmental systems and societies, the research question must allow the student to demonstrate some grasp of how both environmental systems and societies function in the relationship under study. For example, while the environmental systems and societies syllabus includes a study of pure ecological principles, in an EE it would have to be explored within the context of some human interaction with the environmental system.

In literature and performance, the research question must focus on the relationship between the text and the performance and look at this relationship from a number of different viewpoints that could include research into the original text, its genre, the cultural and socio-historical context of which it is part. Students should be careful not to unbalance the EE by allowing research into either the text or the performing art to dominate. If the research question lends itself better to this approach it should be registered under language A or the relevant subject in the arts group.

In world studies, the research question must focus on an issue of contemporary global relevance and must clearly invite an integrative approach involving dimensions that are typically studied in the different disciplines chosen.

Students need to avoid researching a question that is too narrow or too obvious as this will limit their ability to formulate reasoned arguments. The question must give an appropriate context and encourage an investigative approach, including analysis and evaluation rather than description and unsupported value judgments.

Furthermore, a research question should be specific, should address an important and relevant issue in the interdisciplinary field and should try to offer an alternative perspective compared to previous research findings. Students should avoid developing ideas around the topic and research questions that have been addressed fully in earlier academic studies, unless they propose to examine existing views and argue against them to a greater or lesser degree.

They should craft a specific research question that is both interesting to them and challenging. It should present the student with the opportunity to collect or generate information or data for analysis and evaluation.

## Research methods

The EE's emphasis should always be on written analysis, interpretation of data and information, evaluation and construction and development of a sound argument. Therefore, it is vital that the methodology of the essay is tailored to the research question and allows for an in-depth exploration.

In the context of interdisciplinary essays, students should be guided by the methodologies associated with the subject areas they are utilizing, and this may involve both primary and secondary sources and methods.

In the case of environmental systems and societies essays, students may use both primary and secondary methods and sources, including the collection of data from fieldwork, laboratory experimentations, surveys or interviews, or using existing materials. A combination of both is highly recommended.

For literature and performance essays, the primary source is the original text but this will often have accumulated a critical discourse. This may need to be negotiated by the student, as will its historical, cultural or social "place" according to the focus of the research question. Depending on the research question proposed, students should consult visual sources, play texts, live performances and personal contacts.

In world studies, the methodology and sources used will be guided by the two subjects chosen as the disciplinary lenses, and so may come from across the spectrum available for research.

Supervisors need to ensure that students are aware of their responsibility to properly cite the resources used and check their work for plagiarism. Citations should adhere to the requirements of the IB and be consistently applied.

## Framework for the EE in the interdisciplinary field

<b>Introduction</b>	An EE in the interdisciplinary field is intended for students who are interested in undertaking research in an area of environmental systems and societies, literature and performance or world studies on topics of particular interest to them. Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used when writing interdisciplinary EEs.
<b>Methods most relevant to subjects in interdisciplinary essays</b>	Primary methods involve analysis of texts, visual sources, paintings, play texts, live performances and personal contacts. In the case of environmental systems and societies essays, students can take a quantitative data analysis approach through collection of data from fieldwork, laboratory experimentations, surveys or interviews.  Secondary methods include the collection of books, newspaper and magazine articles, interviews and websites on the focus of the student's research. The use of other materials, such as pictures, plans and reviews, is encouraged but should not overwhelm the EE to the detriment of the research discourse.
<b>Suggestions for possible sources</b>	Use of peer-reviewed journals, books, e-resources and online publications, specialized academic research engines, unpublished conference papers, previously published essays.

	<p>Students may wish to interview practitioners and professionals; they may wish to visit theatres, galleries, museums or theatre companies; or they may wish to engage with the subjects on a practical level.</p>
<p><b>Particular things to be aware of</b></p>	<p>Students need to be aware that their work will be checked in terms of the IB's academic honesty policy and so all students must ensure that they are familiar with this document.</p> <p>Since interdisciplinary EEs in many instances involves a creative dimension, students should be aware that esthetic choices need to be validated by research and analysis.</p> <p>Additionally, while students undertaking a world studies EE are not assessed according to the assessment criteria of the subjects they utilize, they must ensure that they have sufficient understanding of the subjects in order to use them effectively. Furthermore, they must adhere to any ethical, legal or research requirements as stipulated by the individual subjects.</p>
<p><b>Summary</b></p>	<p>Undertaking an EE is a challenge and so planning is crucial. Students need to remember to start writing their papers early and discuss any emerging difficulties with their supervisor. Supervisors, librarians, practitioners and professionals in the field are a great source of information, advice and support for students. Students writing the interdisciplinary EE should search for primary and secondary sources of information prior to initiating the writing process. The framing of a good research question that is well structured and thought through will aid students in establishing a reasoned argument.</p>
<p><b>The EE and internal assessments</b></p>	<p>The EE is not an extension of the internal assessment and students must ensure that they are not using material submitted for any other assessment component as part of the EE submission.</p>