

English A extended essay

Grade boundaries

For grade boundary information, please refer to the **Grade boundaries for Diploma programme coordinators** document available on the PRC.

Extended essay

The range and suitability of the work submitted

Texts for categories 1 and 2 included a range of classic and contemporary literary works, while texts for category 3 included a wide variety of language-based works.

Category 1 essays often focused on familiar, classic British and American novels, including Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. But more recent novels, such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, Madeline Miller's *Circe*, or Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* were also popular. There were some essays on drama, including Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*, but essays on poetry, such as the works of Audre Lorde and Maya Angelou, were less prevalent, giving way to essays on song lyrics, including those by Taylor Swift, Kendrick Lamar, and The Beatles. Although these essays on poetry and lyrics could be grounded in literary analysis, they could also take a more sociological approach to the material. Dystopian texts, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and George Orwell's *1984* were also frequently selected. Some dystopian texts dovetailed with Young Adult (YA) novels such as Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, and these essays also often took a sociological rather than a literary focus, using the text to prove a point about culture. This approach additionally happened in essays focusing on philosophy, politics, mental health, race, gender, and LGBTQA+ issues, whether the texts examined were YA (Thomas's *The Hate You Give*) or for adult readers (O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*).

Category 2 essays often effectively compared a text written in English with a translated text, when there was a compelling rationale for pairing them, such as the portrayal of war in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* or the concept of alienation in Dazai's *No Longer Human* and Plath's *The Bell Jar*.

However, there were a number of essays that focused on a single text in translation—rather than in comparison with a text written in English—which led to caps on the marks available for criteria A, B, and C. Texts such as the Grimms' fairy tales and manga (which is becoming quite popular) should be recognized as translations from the original German and Japanese, respectively, and paired with a text composed in English so that the student is not penalized.

Category 3 essays included a wide variety of texts, such as feature films or streaming shows like *Bridgerton*; magazine covers; advertisements promoting an athletic company, the military, and beauty products; news coverage of events from the World Cup to international conflicts. These essays were effective when they analyzed the various types of language (from written to spoken to visual) in the texts rather than lapsing into description. There were also more abstract, and less effective, essays without texts, discussing, for instance, the emergence of streaming services or the cultural dangers of social media.

Criterion A: focus and method

Some essays did not phrase their research question (RQ) as a question on the title page, did not include a question mark at the end of their question, or did not include a RQ at all. In these instances, examiners

recommended more vigilance from the supervisors, especially at this early stage, to help the student produce a RQ that will lead them to an analytical essay focusing on language/literary techniques. Further, some essays didn't include a title, or used a broad one that didn't focus the topic appropriately.

When RQs were phrased as questions, many had an appropriate literary or language focus, but others, especially in essays that focused on the mental health of characters, resulted in essays that offered a medical diagnosis. Many students began their RQ with "How," which could be sharpened to "in what ways" or "by what means" to make a more pointed RQ. Further, when RQs were phrased "How does/do . . .," the resulting essay often identified "how," but didn't analyze the significance or effects of what was identified. It's important to formulate a RQ that invites the student to both identify and explain the significance or effects of what they've found, which is the analytical process.

Students should also note that for comparison and contrast essays, their methodology would be strengthened if they explained in their introduction their rationale for pairing the texts. However, some introductions are excessively long with biography, textual summary, and often unnecessary definitions of basic concepts, and read as "padded."

As for sources, students should be reminded that a literature review is a requirement, so they should include secondary sources. For categories 1 and 2, there has been an increase in less academic secondary sources, such as online study guides, blogs, dot.coms, and online encyclopaedia entries, instead of vetted journal articles and book chapters written by scholars, which look to becoming the exception to the norm. Academic sources should also be reasonably current: there will have been scholarship published since the 1950s, for instance, on classic works. It may be more challenging to find scholarship on more recent texts, but book reviews from reputable sources can be helpful here. Category 3 essays often have more range and variety in secondary sources, but they can also lean on historical or sociological context instead of sources to help with an analysis of language.

Criterion B: knowledge and understanding.

Students are required to carry out a literature review for their essays, which allows them to situate their essay within the discipline. Some essays used secondary sources only in the introduction to provide context. This suggests that they are locating sources on the historical period or the author's biography rather than sources that engage the primary texts. Others used secondary sources throughout to provide interpretations of the text/s. The students used their primary and secondary sources effectively when they engaged with them beyond simply describing their content, which includes quoting. From a technical perspective, sometimes quotations could be overly long or not integrated into the student's prose or signalled appropriately. Other times, quoting from the primary source could illustrate a description, rather than support a point.

Students also demonstrated their knowledge of terminology appropriate to their discipline. When the focus was on literary terminology—or visual terminology as well when analyzing advertisements or film—this knowledge was typically clearly shown. But some essays focused on terminology from psychology, gender or cultural studies, or sociology, which led to more of a character or cultural diagnosis.

Criterion C: critical thinking

This criterion makes available the largest number of marks, and there was a wide variety of approaches to critical thinking. Examiners noted that many students struggled to use research to support an argument and to form a conclusion based on the research. The most effective essays kept the RQ at the forefront of their argument so that there was a consistent focus throughout the essay. The use of quotations was important in building an effective analysis as well: the strongest essays not only quoted from the primary

or secondary sources but also went on to discuss the quotations within the context of the argument. Effective analytical paragraphs began with a topic sentence (a point to prove in the paragraph) followed by development of the point, textual support for the point, and a discussion of that support. In the most effective essays these paragraphs built upon each other such that a nuanced argument unfolded.

Some essays followed an “application” format: they applied a lens such as Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s journey” to a text. The challenge with this approach is that critical thinking—showing the effects of this application—wasn’t always included: the paragraphs would conclude by showing that the lens could be applied to the text in question without thinking critically about the effects.

Students often padded their analysis with excessive context or introductory material, including extended definitions and biography. As noted earlier, some used the text to prove a sociological point; some ventured out into the world to show, for instance, how *1984* or *The Handmaid’s Tale* were applicable to current society instead of focusing on literary analysis.

Criterion D: presentation

Students should be able to earn full marks on this criterion by checking that all required elements are included, by proofreading their paper carefully, and by using a structure that supports their RQ. If the essay is comparative, for instance, a structure that moves back and forth between texts will establish the comparison and contrast more effectively than discussing one text for one half of the essay and the other text for the second half. Abstracts are no longer required, and haven’t been for a number of years, but some students still include them, so it’s important to follow the most recent version of the *Extended essay guide*. (There is no penalty for including an abstract.)

Layout issues that arise frequently include the formatting of the works cited page: using justified type leads to gaps in an entry; using a computer-generated citation can result in capital letters where they aren’t expected. Works cited lists also have conventions of being in alphabetical order, using hanging indents so the reader can distinguish between entries easily, and not having bullets or number lists. Other formatting issues can include too many sections, which can give an essay a choppy appearance and lead to underdeveloped paragraphs, image placement and sizing (they should be legible), and header placement—a works cited header should begin on a fresh page; a header shouldn’t be separated from its prose. Footnotes are also expected to include citations, not additional content, such as definitions or explanations that should be in the main body. A number of essays this session looked to move beyond the 4,000-word limit by including additional information in footnotes (which examiners don’t read). Further, a number of essays were longer than 4,000 words, and in that case, examiners count back from the end of the essay and do not read the words beyond the 4,000 maximum.

Criterion E: engagement

The RPPFs showed significant range, not only including blank sections in part or full, or sections that were descriptive of the supervisor’s advice, but also those that were reflective. Some were also longer than 500 words, and as examiners stop reading at 500, they may miss the student’s final, thoughtful reflections on the process or skills developed. The most effective RPPFs showed that the student recognized both the research/writing skills and the conceptual skills they developed throughout the process. Many examiners, however, noted that students’ reflections were either formulaic or procedural. There were few that showed individual voice and real engagement with the process. It was the rare student who showed intellectual initiative by reflecting on their ideas about the essay: why they chose the text, how they refined their RQ, how they responded to challenges, how they developed their research and writing skills.

Recommendations for the supervision of future students

Examiners recommend that students choose their text(s) carefully. Sometimes a text that the student loves or has a personal connection to is not the right text for an in-depth analysis of 4,000 words. Rather, the student might think of a text that they have an intellectual interest in, something that will support the analysis of literary or language features required for an EE.

Once students select their text, examiners recommend that they focus on the topic and RQ early in the process, refining it so that it invites analysis, not description.

It is also crucial for the supervisor to be aware whether the text selected is in translation. If it is, it must be compared and contrasted with another text composed in the language in which the essay is presented, in this case, English (see pp. 112, 114 of the *Extended essay guide*).

A number of essays were brief—2,500 to 3,500 words long—and supervisors should remind students to make use of their full word count. Conversely, if students have too many words, they should not move definitions and explanations to footnotes but should revise the body of the essay accordingly.

Supervisors should model academic research, showing students which sources are considered scholarly and which are not (study guides, blogs, dot.coms). This will help students build a solid works cited list that they can draw on for their required literature review.

In essays that use lyrics, speeches, or poetry, including the full text in an appendix (after the works cited page) is helpful.

Supervisors should also discuss the use of AI with students. This session examiners encountered essays that use (and cite) AI, as well as essays that use AI but do not cite it. The IB has guidelines regarding consulting and citing AI that must be followed. Supervisors might also remind students that AI is not a necessary tool—that students can think through textual analysis on their own, which is part of the pleasure of a close reading of a text. AI can produce "hallucinations" as well—confident details and quotations that do not exist in the primary text—which results not only in an essay that is not grounded in the student's original thoughts but also one that offers an inaccurate reading of the text.

Further comments

It's important for students and supervisors to familiarize themselves with the most recent *Extended essay guide* so they are aware of requirements—such as a literature review.

Checking that the required presentation elements are in place should be a standard part of the process.

Anonymity is also important: supervisors are also recommended not to use the student's name in their comments, and they should make sure that the student's name is not on the title page before submitting the essay.

It may be helpful for students to build their essay incrementally under their supervisor's guidance, as that process may decrease the number of drafts that are written hastily or with the assistance of AI.