

History 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

On the whole the essays submitted were generally sound in terms of adhering to regulations regarding presentation and most students chose topics and tasks which were suitable for an extended essay (EE) in history. As will be noted below though, there is room for improvement in a variety of ways in relation to improving performance and awards in the various criteria.

Some excellent essays were submitted which revealed not only a very strong grasp of the requirements across the individual criteria but a genuine level of historical knowledge and understanding which was impressive to say the least at secondary school/centre level.

There was though a significant number of essays that had not benefited from supervisor advice as to how to frame and phrase a suitable research question (RQ) which allows for the possibility of an analytical response as opposed to a narrative / descriptive treatment of the task. The choice of task - ideally one with a clearly defined focus chronologically and / or geographically / thematically is critical to the production of an essay which can enable students to meet the requirements of the higher mark bands in criteria A-C especially.

The supervisor's role in guiding the student in terms of selecting a suitable topic (historically based and not contravening the 10-year rule) is a vital one. Many students are disadvantaged at the outset by the choice of questionable topics and/or RQs phrased in such a way as to encourage narration and descriptive treatment rather than an analytical approach.

The command terms 'How...?', 'What...?' and 'Why...?' are not recommended since, in the majority of cases, they end up producing responses which fail to provide sufficient critical commentary to score well in criterion C, the criterion with the highest mark tariff. The most popular command term continues to be 'To what extent...?' which does, in theory, encourage students to consider a variety of factors in addressing the task as well as producing a conclusion regarding the relative significance/importance of such factors – and why. In too many cases however the 'To what extent...' command term, though used in the RQ was not sufficiently addressed in the actual treatment of the task. TWE tasks do require acknowledgement and consideration of 'other factors' in order to produce an appropriate treatment of the task.

Some essays were not appropriate for history and others infringed, in part or in whole, the 10-year rule which applies to EEs in history. In such cases students were placed at a disadvantage in terms of being able to attain the higher mark bands in several of the criteria (A, B and C specifically which are capped for such efforts at a maximum of 4, 4, and 3 respectively)

Student performance against each criterion

Criterion A: focus and method

In criterion A relatively few essays got beyond the marking level 3-4 because of the failure to develop sufficient relevant context and methodology, or in some cases to provide a source base which went beyond web sites which were often of questionable academic merit for a study in depth at this level.

For the most part students did identify the RQ but the inability to remain focused throughout the essay on discussion of the task was not uncommon. Overlong background narrative/descriptive treatment

meant the specific RQ was at times only partially focused upon in terms of dealing with the stated task. Methodology should include consideration of the areas of investigation to be undertaken in the attempt to address the question and evidence of an informed, relevant and appropriate choice of sources used in the investigation.

Weaker essays often provided a limited list of history revision sites, Wikipedia and Britannica articles as the main source base and examination of RPPF forms completed by students in such cases seemed to show little awareness why these sources, for an essay at this level, may be considered inadequate.

Criterion B: knowledge and understanding

Knowledge and understanding, were generally satisfactory in the majority of cases but again, the paucity of an academic source base sometimes led to awards hovering in the 3-4 band in many essays. Effective use of sources was limited by the limited nature of the sources selected which in turn was reflected by a less than convincing and clear grasp of the topic area and the demonstration of effective, accurate detailed knowledge and understanding.

On the whole the use of subject-specific terminology was sound.

Criterion C: critical thinking

Criterion C was noticeably the weakest area for many students whose essays tended towards a descriptive/narrative rather than analytical approach. Describing or cataloguing/chronicling what historians say does not in itself constitute analysis/critical commentary and source evaluation was often done in the manner of an IA evaluation of two sources (in discrete sections rather than being integrated into the essay's main body).

This 'stand-alone' type of 'evaluation using OPCVL in the style of the IA's historical investigation, has been pointed out previously as being inappropriate in the EE, but many students still seem to be under the impression that this method - or source evaluation in the form of extensive annotated bibliographies - will be rewarded with grades in the upper levels. It is clear that some centres have taught students that these approaches to source analysis are what is expected but while there may be some credit given for the former, centres/supervisors and students need to know that annotated bibliographies cannot be rewarded for any source evaluation attempts made.

Effective source analysis and awareness and explicit evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the source material used was less in evidence than in former sessions. Often when some students did try to deal with evaluation they often focused on issues of content and utility rather than a critical assessment of the source and its provenance and how this could affect its value for the study being undertaken.

However, at the top end, confident handling of the sources and evaluation of not only the material, the factors being discussed and also critical commentary regarding the merits of varying historiographical schools in relation to the task were very good indeed and suggested such skills have been well reinforced in the teaching of the subject and the EE history process.

N.B. Given the high tariff for this criterion (a maximum of 12 marks) centres and students need to concentrate on this area in future. Effective and reasoned argument based on the information researched was not always evident and conclusions often introduced new material that had not been dealt with in the main body of the essay.

Criterion D: presentation

Poor referencing is referred to the academic honesty department of the IB for consideration and investigation as a possible issue of 'suspected malpractice'.

Success in terms of presentation consists of producing an essay which is visually appealing (properly formatted and neatly set out and fulfils the requirements of producing a cover page which consists of a title, a RQ (phrased as a question!) and a word count. Students are also required to make sure an accurately numbered table of contents and pagination are provided as well as a formal conclusion and a bibliography which is set out in alphabetical order (by author, surname).

Students should note that the provision of a table of contents which goes beyond the bare 'introduction, main body, conclusion' is strongly recommended. The table of contents should set out the main areas being investigated in the essay (indicated in subheadings) along with accurate page numbers for these sections. Subheadings that are noted on the contents page should also appear in the main body of the essay. Close attention to the provision of the above elements should ensure that most students access the higher marks in this criterion - and the 3 or 4 marks which can be gained here can prove critical in many cases in helping to decide the final overall mark and subsequent grad categorisation of the essay.

Criterion E: engagement

As an element this continues to cause some confusion. What often appeared was either a description of the findings of the essay, a narrative along the lines of 'I went to the library...' / 'I looked at web sites...' or a description which revealed more about what the supervisor told them to do (step by step) rather than charting the process of the 'journey' undertaken and the challenges/conceptual understanding / skills development which accompanied the 'journey'.

The student voice was sometimes muted or quite absent in the RPPF and there was a need for more evidence of engagement in the process from topic/RQ choice to an acknowledgment of the difficulties faced and how they were resolved- and if not, why.

Recommendations for the supervision of future students

Good supervision remains key in terms of selection of an appropriate topic, a focused RQ (phrased as a question and directing students towards a critical treatment of the RQ). Supervisors and students need to realise that if choosing a TWE approach they need to understand what this consists of and how such task is to be tackled.

The single greatest resource of a student is the supervisor. Sometimes students, it appears, were not always well served. It is always the case that some students will simply fail to heed advice and continue on their own path, but the impression gained often was of weaker students being further disadvantaged by weak supervision.

Centres/Schools which have committed to the IB Diploma Programme have a responsibility not only for their students but also for providing help and training for the supervisors who are faced with an avalanche of information concerning the EE process. Professional development opportunities and time for supervisors to process the instructions and discuss approaches with other practitioners are recommended in the interests of promoting success for students in the EE.

Further comments

Emphasis needs to be on criteria C and D in particular: the former due to the lack of critical commentary and analysis which impacts strongly on the final award and the latter because it is a criterion in which even the weakest of students can be expected to gain a respectable award if the basic elements of presentation noted above are neatly and accurately provided.