

Oxford Resources for IB
Diploma Programme



2025 EDITION

EXTENDED ESSAY

COURSE COMPANION

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Refining your research question

As you will see in the table below, you can narrow down the scope of your investigation by taking each aspect of the question in turn and asking what the possible limiting factors could be (highlighted in yellow).

Subject: English (language A)	
Original title: The theme of social class in 21st-century texts	
Limiting factor	21st-century texts
Question	Which novels or novelists from the 21st century am I interested in?
Answer	Kiran Desai



Refined title: The theme of social class in the novels of Kiran Desai	
Limiting factor	Kiran Desai
Question	Which specific work(s) by Desai?
Answer	<i>The Inheritance of Loss</i>



Refined title: The theme of social class in <i>The Inheritance of Loss</i> by Kiran Desai	
Limiting factor	Social class
Question	What aspect of social class?
Answer	Poverty vs privilege



Refined title: Desai's attitudes to power and privilege in <i>The Inheritance of Loss</i>	
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Final question: In what ways does Kiran Desai express her attitudes to the themes of power and privilege in her work <i>The Inheritance of Loss</i> ?	
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Now you have a very good starting point to begin your extended essay research as your title has a clear focus and is narrow enough to be covered within the word limit.

Here are further examples of how you could apply limiting factors to a variety of subject-specific titles.

Subject: History	
Original title: Authoritarian states of the 20th century	
Limiting factor	Authoritarian states
Question	Which authoritarian states am I interested in?
Answer	Communism under Joseph Stalin and fascism under Benito Mussolini



→ Refined title: A comparison of the communist state in Russia under Joseph Stalin with the fascist state in Italy under Benito Mussolini	
Limiting factor	Comparison, communist state, fascist state
Question	Which specific area of these two states am I interested in comparing?
Answer	Who was more effective in controlling their citizens



Final title: To what extent was Joseph Stalin's communist state more effective than Benito Mussolini's fascist state at controlling its citizens?

Subject: Visual arts

Original title: The **architecture** of Le Corbusier

Limiting factor	Architecture
Question	What specific architecture from Le Corbusier's work am I interested in?
Answer	Villa Stein (Garches, France), Unité d'Habitation (Marseilles, France)



Refined title: An exploration into the works **Villa Stein and Unité d'Habitation** by architect Le Corbusier

Limiting factor	Villa Stein (Garches, France), Unité d'Habitation (Marseilles, France)
Question	Which specific aspect of these buildings do I want to explore?
Answer	The use of proportional systems such as Le Corbusier's "Modulor"



Final title: In what ways does Le Corbusier use the Modulor proportional system in the works Villa Stein and Unité d'Habitation?

Subject: Psychology

Original title: The **usefulness** of music therapy

Limiting factor	Usefulness
Question	Useful in what manner or in what field?
Answer	As a palliative for dementia sufferers

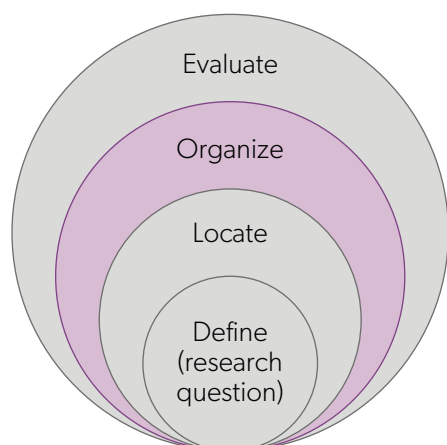


Refined title: An evaluation of the success of music therapy as palliative care for sufferers of **dementia**

Limiting factor	Dementia
Question	Which specific type of dementia do I wish to explore?
Answer	Dementia of the Alzheimer Type (DAT)



Final title: To what extent can music therapy be deemed a successful palliative for the symptoms of Dementia of the Alzheimer Type (DAT)?



Organizing source material

Once you have gathered all your resources together, the next step (and an important one!) is to organize them so that you'll have an easier time referencing material when writing your essay.

Reading a pile of books, magazines and journals usually feels like a large part of the research work and once this is done, there is a tendency to simply jump straight into the writing of the essay. However, this is not a good approach. No matter how good your memory is, when the time comes to write the essay, details and specific information will be lost or conflated with other bits of information simply because of the sheer number of sources used.

Condensing numerous works to a single essay

As the extended essay is written over an extended period of time, you can take advantage of this using organized note-taking. Taking notes in an organized manner means that you will have a quick reference point when writing your essay.

Below are examples of ways you could structure your reading and notes to maximize your time later on. Rather than spending time rereading your sources, organizing your notes under these three headings will allow you to instead maximize the grades awarded for critical thinking and engagement.

Source	Notes	Topic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Source type (such as book, website and journal) Use Microsoft Word's automatic referencing feature or use an approved style (there are free online bibliography creation tools you could also use) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary of key points, bullet points of themes, ideas, research and so on Include quotations, page numbers, new references/paths of investigation and so on 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What information have you extracted from the source that relates to your topic/question? Highlight possible paragraph topic sentences/thesis statements for inclusion in the essay proper

Here is an example of a completed grid:

Research question: To what extent could Pope Urban II's foreign policy in the 11th century (1095 CE) be deemed an attempt at reconciliation between Western Europe and the Eastern Roman Empire rather than an attempt to increase papal power in Europe?		
Source	Notes	Topic
Book: Somerville, R. (2011). <i>Pope Urban II's Council of Piacenza (March 1–7, 1095)</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press.	Bernold of Constance confirms the receipt of emissaries from the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I while Pope Urban was in Piacenza (pp. 15–16). The emissaries pleaded with Pope Urban to provide support. Pope was attempting to support Alexius to gain influence in the Byzantine Empire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Political: showed leadership and vision – Religious: support for co-religionist emperor in East – Religious: support for co-religionist emperor in East

<p>→ Book: Norwich, J. J. (2011). <i>The Popes: A History</i>. London: Chatto & Windus</p>	<p>Suggested that Urban was aiming to unite the warring barons and princes of Europe under his banner by appealing to their sense of martial valour and the prospect of spoils from conquest.</p>	<p>– Political: increase papal power</p>
<p>The first column includes all the relevant bibliographical details. These can be lifted straight into your essay.</p>	<p>The second column includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • quotations (and page numbers) • relevant details • mini analyses • quick facts. <p>This is the place to store all of your key notes or evidence from the source material you have read. It will make it much easier to locate useful quotations or facts if you organize your reading and note-taking in this fashion.</p> <p>All of the information here can again be embedded directly into your essay, as needed.</p>	<p>The third column includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • headings • possible chapter titles • factors. <p>This is very useful for structuring possible chapters in the extended essay or developing key theses in the main body of the essay. As you read, you will invariably come across key ideas, themes or factors that you can use to respond to your essay's title. Colour-coding (or highlighting) the headings is useful for when you want to find specific notes rather than having to read through all of them again. In the above examples, all political factors are highlighted in blue, while all religious factors appear in red.</p>

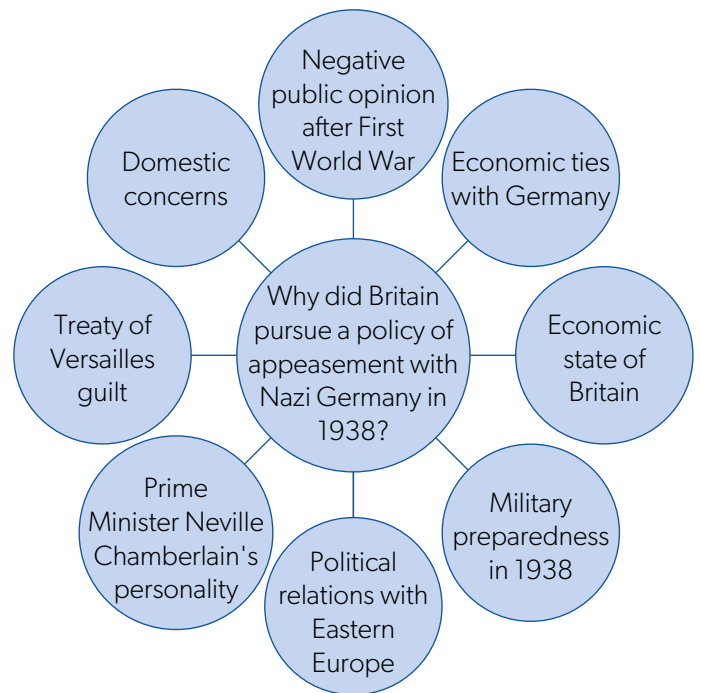
Organizing chapters or paragraphs

Before beginning to write the essay it may also help to map out what key factors you feel are most relevant to your question. Three approaches are suggested to help plan and organize your writing: mind maps, progression charts and branches.

Mind maps

Mind maps are great for jotting down all the associated factors linked to a topic. Do this in two stages:

1. Write down all the factors you can think of that relate to your question as shown in the mind map on the right. These should emerge out of your reading.



Exemplar introduction

Below are sections of an introduction for a history extended essay. It showcases how to include the four core aspects outlined on pages 69–71.

Research question: To what extent does Mu'awiya I owe his accession to the caliphate in 661 CE to the weakness of his principal rival, Caliph Ali?

Context

Mu'awiya's accession to the caliphate is a hotly debated topic among historians with some, such as Kennedy, arguing that he owes his elevation to the weakness of the opposition as reflected in the figure of Caliph Ali. Others, such as Shaban, argue that his success owes itself in large measure to the tangible economic benefits that support for Mu'awiya provided the Arab tribes.

Line of argument

... the essay will explore what other factors, including the governorship of Syria, the conflict with Byzantium, the dwindling role of the Ansar, and the role of the Kharijites helped Mu'awiya take over the caliphate while relying on the works of principal historians such as Kennedy, Shaban, Armstrong and Hawting.

Approach

... this essay seeks to challenge the orthodox interpretation offered by Kennedy and instead argue that Mu'awiya's success owes much to the changing socio-economic dynamics among Arab tribesmen within the newly formed Islamic Empire.

Worthiness

... this research question is worthy of investigation because Mu'awiya's rise to the caliphate marks a significant turning point in the development of the Islamic Empire during the 7th century and beyond. It established the tradition of dynastic and monarchic succession that would become commonplace in the ensuing centuries. The role played by Caliph Ali in supplanting the Rashidun model with a dynastic model is of critical significance to this early medieval period as it created the conditions for the schism between Sunni and Shi'a practices ...

See Worksheet 1 on page 80 for more help with this.

Tip

The suggested word count for the introduction is 300–450 words.

Key terms

A **free-flow** writing style is a less rigid one, where the essay is not divided into sections and simply moves from one paragraph to the next.

A **sectioned** writing style is a more compartmentalized one, where the essay is subdivided into sections or chapters.

Main body

The main body of an extended essay can differ structurally depending on which subject (or even topic) has been chosen. When structuring an extended essay the first consideration for the main body is to choose between a **free-flow** or **sectioned** writing style.

Although there is no hard rule for this, the table below lists the most commonly seen approaches when it comes to structuring an essay in a particular subject (or topic area):

Subject or topic	Approach
Literature	Free-flow
Language or culture	Sectioned, free-flow
Individuals and societies	Sectioned
Sciences	Sectioned
Mathematics	Sectioned
Arts	Sectioned, free-flow

Irrespective of the chosen approach, all essays benefit from some clear pre-planning with regards to the core points they wish to develop in order to answer their research question.

Identifying the essay's core points is of immense help when it comes to structuring your writing as it can form the basis of the subheadings used (or in the case of a free-flow essay, the layout of the paragraphs), so that a developing argument is formed.

Paragraph writing

Irrespective of the approach selected, all essays should feature paragraphs. The important point to keep in mind when it comes to paragraphs is that they should indicate a shift from one line of argument to another or from one developmental point to another.

The exemplar model below provides a structured approach to paragraph writing based on five parts, as shown in the diagram.

1. Thesis

Your thesis statement or topic sentence is your opening statement. This should be a brief opening line (or two) establishing the key element to be covered in the paragraph.

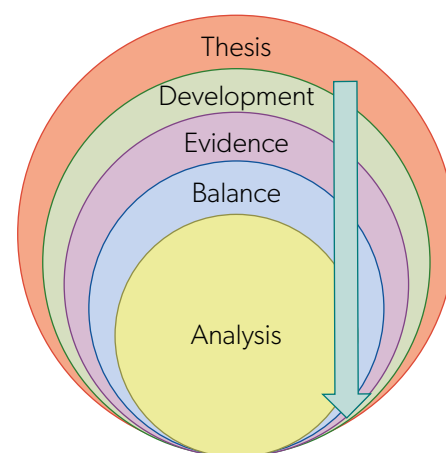
2. Development

This is an elaboration of your principal thesis—the meaning of your thesis and the areas it touches upon, for example.

- It should flow naturally from the thesis.
- It can offer mini analyses as you wrestle with the implications of what you're saying.

3. Evidence

This is the most important part of each paragraph. All theses and points raised in your development should be supported by evidence.



Each criterion will be elaborated upon in the following section with suggested approaches, useful tips and explanations relating to the strands offered across a wide range of IB subjects.

Criterion A: Framework for the essay (6 marks)

- Key strands:**
- Research question
 - Research methods
 - Structure

Choice of topic

Alongside focusing on the key strands for this criterion, you must make sure that the topic of your extended essay is clearly relevant to the subject it is registered under by your school's coordinator. For example, an extended essay on the topic of the trade disputes between China and the USA between 2019 and 2023 would be relevant to economics, provided that you analyse it through that subject's lens and methodological tools (for example, the impact government macroeconomic policies relating to the semiconductor industry had on the economic development of California). Alternatively, your topic might be global politics or even history, if you focused on the impact of the USA–China trade dispute on international and national security.

Tip

With topics that don't seem to fit within a particular subject, you should be very clear how your mode of analysis and approach squarely fits the designated subject you wish to register the essay for. This will help direct an examiner to making the link themselves and thus not penalise you for a topic that is irrelevant to the registered subject.

Care must be taken to ensure that topics that straddle multiple disciplines are clearly approached and analysed from the perspective of the registered subject. For instance, if you plan to write an extended essay in language B and choose to focus on a film, you must explore that film as a cultural artefact rather than through a film analysis, as would be the approach in a film extended essay.

For interdisciplinary essays, the same rule applies, so be careful that the two subjects you select perfectly fit the topic you plan to investigate. Of course, with interdisciplinary essays you have to also ensure the overall topic can be analysed through the lens of the two chosen subjects. For example, if you chose to write about the growth of artificial intelligence in the workplace, you would need to make it clear how such a topic fits both subjects (for example, business and digital society).

Research question

The research question is, unsurprisingly, one of the key elements of a strong extended essay. A good research question is one that:

- focuses your investigation on something that is both worthy and workable (i.e., there are sufficient sources available to use)
- compels a high degree of research, evaluation and analysis (avoiding descriptive or narrative-style writing)
- is sharply focused on a topic that can be covered within 4,000 words (avoiding multi-pronged approaches that would make the investigation too broad)
- leads to a conclusion that is not immediately obvious.

Tip

Questions that are largely of the "yes/no" variety, or that lead to a simple conclusion, will not meet these criteria.

Usually questions that begin with “who” or “what” lead to poor investigations, as seen in the examples below:

History extended essay on the Munich Agreement (1938)

Research question: What did Chamberlain hope to achieve from the Munich Agreement in 1938?

Conclusion: He sought to avoid war with Nazi Germany.

Visual arts extended essay on H. R. Giger’s work

Research question: Which techniques did H. R. Giger find more emblematic for his work?

Conclusion: Airbrush

Economics extended essay on the public listing of a company

Research question: Who stands to benefit the most from the public listing of Company A?

Conclusion: The shareholders

A good research question will ensure you are in contention for the very highest marks as almost every part of the extended essay (such as the line of argument and the sources) hinges on the strength of the question itself, so do take the time to ensure your question fits all the conditions outlined earlier.

Methodology

Methodology effectively refers to two things: approach and methods.

Approach

Your approach is the overall strategy that you will follow to answer your question.

Consider this to mean the overall structure of your extended essay—that is to say, the elements, factors, opinions or theories that are relevant to answering your question. These indicate the overall strategy and lens through which the question will be explored.

Methods

Your methods are the specific tools, processes, experiments and techniques that you will use to answer your question.

Consider this to mean the specific means through which you will conduct your investigation. The methods you choose to use will vary from subject to subject although there are some basic expectations that subjects have when it comes to appropriate methods. For example, literary subjects may expect a close reading of texts while the sciences may have an expectation that some kind of experiment is conducted.

For more on how to devise good research questions see Chapter 2, page 21.

Tip

For instance, in the EE Café example in Chapter 6, pages 101–105, the student chose to answer the question about the collapse of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) by exploring environmental factors, the arrival of Europeans and domestic factors, which they included in their table of contents (with accompanying subheadings).

The student may have chosen to explore environmental factors as part of their overall strategy but the way they investigated this, and the other factors, was by analysing the works of historians such as Cooper, Diamond and Fischer.