

History

These subject guidelines should be read in conjunction with the “Introduction”, “Outline” and “Details—all essays” sections of this guide.

Overview

An extended essay in history (including Islamic history) provides students with an opportunity to undertake in-depth research in an area of history of genuine interest to them. The outcome of the research should be a coherent and structured essay that effectively addresses a particular issue expressed as a research question, or, if this is unsuitable, a hypothesis. Students writing their extended essay in history are strongly advised to use a research question.

Choice of topic

The topic chosen must focus on the human past, be worthy of study, and lend itself to systematic investigation in line with the published assessment criteria. Essays that focus on events of the last 10 years are not acceptable, as these are regarded as current affairs, not history.

It is not a requirement for the topic to be chosen from the Diploma Programme history course, but it must be acceptable to the supervisor. It should provide an opportunity for critical analysis of source material, and not depend on summarizing general secondary sources (such as textbooks and encyclopedias), as this approach is likely to lead to an essay that is essentially narrative or descriptive. The topic chosen must be suitable for effective treatment within the 4,000-word limit, so those that cover many aspects of history, and/or a long time period, are unlikely to produce successful essays. Narrowing the scope of the essay will help to ensure a clear focus, and will also allow students to demonstrate detailed and specific historical knowledge, understanding and critical analysis.

The following examples of titles for history extended essays are intended as guidance only. The pairings illustrate that focused topics (indicated by the first title) should be encouraged rather than broad topics (indicated by the second title). Note that it is not necessary to have a separate title for an extended essay in history, as the research question or hypothesis can be used on the cover as well as in the abstract and essay. It is usually better if this is the case, because it avoids confusion and helps the student to obtain a clear focus. However, most students start by thinking in terms of a wider topic and the following “Treatment of the topic” section gives guidance on defining and narrowing it.

- “Causes of the collapse of the Mayan civilization” **is better than** “The Mayan civilization”.
- “Varying interpretations of the Salem witch trials” **is better than** “Witch trials in North America”.
- “Use of the visual arts in fascist propaganda” **is better than** “Fascist propaganda”.
- “Stalin’s use of the party machine and terror” **is better than** “The Soviet Union under Stalin”.
- “The role of the Pan-African movement in the downfall of Kwame Nkrumah in 1966” **is better than** “Kwame Nkrumah”.

Treatment of the topic

It is important that the topic, as stated in the research question, is appropriate for a history extended essay. Where topics could be approached from different viewpoints, such as economics or geography, the treatment of material must meet the subject requirements of history.

Students must choose a research question that is not of a trivial nature. Research questions that do not lead to systematic investigation, critical analysis and detailed understanding are unlikely to be suitable. Social history does include areas such as music and sport, but these are only acceptable for a history extended essay if they are tackled from a historical perspective. Adequate available sources are essential. If it is clear at an early stage in the research that they are not, a change of topic or focus should be made.

Research requires the use of sources. Ideally, primary sources will be included but an essay that uses only secondary sources will not be disqualified. Many different approaches to the research question can be appropriate, for instance:

- using primary and secondary sources in order to establish and appraise varying interpretations
- analysing sources in order to explain changing views over time of particular happenings or developments
- using source material for a case study or local history project, perhaps leading to a comparison of local and national developments
- collecting and analysing oral and written data from family and other contacts to help explain past happenings, perhaps leading to a comparison of local and national developments
- using all available sources to answer the question posed.

Some examples of titles, research questions and approaches chosen in the past include the following.

Title	Varying interpretations of the Salem witch trials
Research question	Which theory best explains the Salem witch trials?
Approach	Background reading is undertaken to enable identification and explanation of two dominant theories as to why the trials took place. The merits of the two theories are appraised using data obtained about the accused and the accusers.
Title	The influence of National Socialist ideology on the German school system in the late 1930s: a case study
Research question	To what extent were Hitler's educational aims fulfilled in the Uhland Gymnasium, 1937–1939?
Approach	Reading is undertaken to enable a summarization of National Socialist ideology and curriculum proposals. Primary sources (teachers' records) are used to establish how far the proposed changes were put into practice in one school during 1937–1939.

Title	Changing views of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis
Research question	How and why have explanations of the Cuban missile crisis changed since 1962?
Approach	General reading is undertaken for a historical introduction and note taking. The views of a number of historians are summarized in order to understand, categorize and evaluate selected explanations of the 1962 missile crisis in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

The value and reliability of sources should not be accepted uncritically in history extended essays, especially when the authenticity of some of the sources is questionable. Students can show awareness of the value and limitations of the main sources used in their investigation through analysing their origin and purpose. (Who were the authors? What were their intentions? Is it likely that any of the sources have been altered?) Relevant outcomes of this analysis should be integrated into the student's argument (or at least considered in footnotes).

Students should aim to produce an argument that consistently shows good historical understanding in setting the research question into context, and addressing it fully and effectively. The argument should also be well substantiated, based on relevant specific evidence produced with added analytical comments.

Good critical analysis and historical judgment can be demonstrated through a sound assessment of source material and differing explanations and interpretations. Opportunities for reporting and assessing differing interpretations will vary with the topic chosen; students will gain credit for explaining why a historian reached the interpretation, not just for stating it.

An extended essay in history is a formal essay that is marked according to the assessment criteria. An essay may appear to be satisfactory but it will not score well if the criteria are ignored.

Interpreting the assessment criteria

Criterion A: research question

The research question must be appropriate to the particular subject in which the essay is submitted. In history, this means that it must focus on the human past and not be of a trivial nature. The research question must be clearly and exactly focused, and stated in both the abstract and the introduction of the essay.

Criterion B: introduction

The introduction should explain succinctly the significance and context of the topic, why it is worthy of investigation and, where appropriate, how the research question relates to existing knowledge. It should not be used for lengthy, irrelevant background material.

Criterion C: investigation

The range of resources available will be influenced by various factors, but above all by the topic. Students should aim to make use of both primary and secondary sources but this may not always be possible. The data gathered should be the evidence found in the sources to establish the context and to support the argument and conclusion of the essay. Proper planning of an essay should involve integrating source material, both factual and historians' views, in light of the research question. The latter should be used to support the student's own argument and not as a substitute for it. A statement by a historian should be challenged where there is evidence to do so.

All material used from sources must be acknowledged in references. If students make use of Internet-based sources, they should do so critically and circumspectly in full awareness of their potential unreliability.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

The essay should have a solid foundation of specific relevant knowledge, whose meaning is understood by the student. This knowledge can then be analysed and, on the basis of this analysis, an argument can be formed and a conclusion to the research question reached.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

Students should be aware of the need to give their essays the backbone of a developing argument. Personal views should not simply be stated but need to be supported by reasoned argument based on specific details, to persuade the reader of their validity. Straightforward descriptive or narrative accounts that lack analysis do not usually advance an argument and should be avoided.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject

Analysis is a very important historical skill. Students should analyse (that is, consider the meaning and importance of) the relevant factual evidence/data produced by their research, to argue a case and reach a conclusion. Sources used in the research process should be evaluated and their reliability assessed.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject

Students writing extended essays in history need to take three factors into consideration for this criterion: the language must be clear and unambiguous, historical terminology should be used, and statements should be specific and precise, avoiding sweeping generalizations and unsupported assertions. This criterion is not meant to disadvantage students who are not writing in their first language—as long as the meaning is clear, the historical content will be rewarded.

Criterion H: conclusion

The most important aspect of the conclusion of a history essay is that it must reflect the evidence and argument presented in the body of the essay. It should also answer the research question asked, and if the data and analysis failed to do so, the conclusion must state this as well as any other problems encountered.

Criterion I: formal presentation

This criterion relates to the extent to which the essay conforms to academic standards about the way in which research papers should be presented. The presentation of essays that omit a bibliography or that do not give references for quotations is deemed unacceptable (level 0). Essays that omit one of the required elements—title page, table of contents, page numbers—are deemed no better than satisfactory (maximum level 2), while essays that omit two of them are deemed poor at best (maximum level 1).

Careful recording of the relevant details of all evidence significant to the research question is necessary so that complete references can be provided in the essay, including page numbers. Any accepted form of referencing can be used. Full details of the author, title of publication, publisher and date of publication must be provided in the bibliography, which should list all the sources used in the essay in alphabetical order (by author's family name). Tables and charts should appear in the body of the essay, as close as possible to their first reference. Any material that is not original must be acknowledged. If an appendix is included, it should be cross-referenced with the essay, otherwise it has little value.

Criterion J: abstract

The abstract must consist of three elements: the research question (or hypothesis), the scope of the essay (that is, what was investigated and how it was investigated) and the conclusion. An abstract is not a precis of the topic.

Criterion K: holistic judgment

Qualities that are rewarded under this criterion include the following.

- Intellectual initiative: Ways of demonstrating this in history essays include the choice of topic and research question, locating and using sources that have been little used previously or generated for the study (for instance, transcripts of oral interviews), and new approaches to popular topics (possibly achieved through evaluation of varying historical explanations).
- Insight and depth of understanding: These are most likely to be demonstrated as a consequence of detailed research, reflection that is thorough and well informed, and reasoned argument that consistently and effectively addresses the research question.