

Human rights

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 human rights provides students with an opportunity to undertake an in-depth study of a limited topic in this area of research. Students who are considering registering an extended essay in this subject (which is a school-based syllabus) are strongly advised to study carefully a copy of the syllabus, obtainable from IBCA, before making a final decision. The syllabus gives a clear idea of the scope and content of the subject, and will help students to decide whether their choice of topic is appropriate. 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.

Choice of topic

Human rights considerations are relevant to almost any human activity, but particularly those involving the treatment of groups or individuals, use of resources and technologies, or access to services such as education. Human rights issues are often referred to in the media, especially in the context of war and conflict. The protection of human rights has also inspired the founding of several important organizations such as the Red Cross, the United Nations and Amnesty International.

There are many topics that are potentially suitable for a human rights extended essay. However, when choosing a topic, it is important for students to bear in mind that it must encourage analysis and evaluation rather than description and unsupported value judgments, and must allow critical evaluation of human rights issues and practices in light of relevant theories and arguments.

When choosing a topic, students must ensure that the various assessment criteria can be satisfied within the 4,000-word limit. Students are advised to avoid topics that are too broad in scope to permit an in-depth study within the prescribed word limit. A limited topic, thoroughly researched and with a clear focus, is preferable to a broad topic that can only be examined superficially.

Students may use journalistic or visual material, interviews or data from the Internet, but their essays should not be based solely on such sources. An extended essay in this subject is expected to show that the student possesses a knowledge and understanding of human rights theories.

The following examples of titles for human rights 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).

- “The political rights of women in Saudi Arabia” **is better than** “Women’s rights”.
- “The cultural rights of Australian Aborigines” **is better than** “The cultural rights of indigenous peoples”.

- “The US intervention in Kosovo: a critical analysis of justifications for the use of force to protect human rights” **is better than** “The USA and Kosovo”.
- “The UN response to the genocide in Rwanda” **is better than** “The Rwandan genocide”.

Treatment of the topic

The topic for a human rights extended essay should focus on a particular human rights issue or a practice of a particular agent, be it a government, individual or organization, linking this issue or practice to relevant theories of human rights. For example, the first topic in the following list (about the political rights of women in Saudi Arabia) could involve an exploration of the issue of cultural relativism *versus* the universality of human rights. Similarly, the third topic in the list could involve references to “just war” theories or arguments for and against the use of force in protecting rights.

Similar treatment should be applied to other topics. For example, a student studying the work of a local human rights organization or a local human rights issue should link this to relevant theories. An essay comparing US and Soviet rhetorical descriptions of a human rights issue during the Cold War, for example, should make explicit what ideas or theories of human rights these superpowers seemed to be promoting. Whatever the topic, the treatment must involve a consideration of relevant theoretical perspectives.

An effective treatment of a topic requires that issues, practices, and relevant theories and arguments are explained in a concise and analytical manner using appropriate terminology, and that the ideas are supported by well-chosen examples. The argument in the essay should be logical and students should aim to answer the research question or prove the hypothesis set out in the introduction. In addition, a good essay will demonstrate that the student has used sources of information critically, paying particular attention to biased language and reporting. Relevant illustrations, diagrams and statistical tables should also be used when appropriate.

The following are some examples of titles, research questions and approaches for human rights.

Title	The political rights of women in Saudi Arabia
Research question	To what extent can the limited political rights of women in Saudi Arabia be justified?
Approach	Reading is undertaken to enable a description of the political rights of women in Saudi Arabia and arguments that support such limitations. The limited political rights are critically discussed in light of some human rights theories—for example, cultural relativism and universality of human rights.
Title	The US intervention in Kosovo: a critical analysis of justifications for the use of force to protect human rights
Research question	To what extent was the US use of force in Kosovo a justified humanitarian intervention?
Approach	Reading is undertaken to enable a summary of the debate that preceded the US intervention in Kosovo and the impact it had on Kosovo. The US intervention in light of the “just war” theory is discussed to assess to what extent the US actions were justified.

Title	The UN response to the genocide in Rwanda
Research question	How could the UN intervention in the Rwandan genocide be justified?
Approach	Reading is undertaken to enable a summary of the UN debate regarding the intervention in Rwanda and the impact the intervention had on the country. There is an analysis of arguments for and against intervention, an identification of which human rights theories the arguments are based on and a discussion of whether the UN response was justified.

Students should aim to produce an argument that shows a good understanding of relevant concepts, ideas, theories and contemporary human rights issues. They should demonstrate an awareness of cultural and religious contexts that may affect the interpretation of human rights issues.

An extended essay in human rights 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 human rights, this means that it must focus on some contemporary human rights issue. The research question must be clearly and exactly focused, and stated in both the abstract and 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, what the key concepts are and how the research question relates to existing knowledge. A good introduction also provides an outline of the essay and may contain a hypothesis. It should not contain irrelevant background material.

Criterion C: investigation

The range of resources is influenced by various factors, but above all by the topic. Students should aim to use sources that present different theoretical approaches, as well as those that enable human rights issues to be understood from different cultural perspectives.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Students should aim to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of human rights theories, issues and practices. Students should also demonstrate their awareness of cultural contexts and biases that often affect the ways that human rights theories, issues and practices are explained.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

Students should aim to present their ideas in the form of a logical and coherent argument that is relevant to the research question. Ideas should be substantiated with factual evidence and examples. 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

Students should demonstrate their analytical skills by identifying premises, assumptions, and possible hidden agendas and biases linked to human rights theories and practices. They should be able to deconstruct arguments related to these theories and practices, and evaluate to what extent agents who claim to support particular principles are applying them in practice. Because human rights issues are often contested and it is not uncommon for biased views to be presented, students should pay special attention to the evaluation of sources. They should avoid unjustified and subjective value judgments regarding human rights issues, but be able to evaluate how theories and practices link to concepts of justice and equality.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject

The language used should be clear, unambiguous and precise. Terminology specific to human rights should be used wherever possible to communicate ideas efficiently. Sweeping generalizations, unsupported assertions, overly subjective value judgment and biased language should all be avoided. This criterion is not meant to disadvantage students who are not writing in their first language—as long as the meaning is clear, the subject content will be rewarded.

Criterion H: conclusion

The conclusion of a human rights extended essay should reflect the evidence and argument presented in the body of the essay. It should also, if possible, provide a direct answer to the research question or address the hypothesis. If the research did not support the original hypothesis, this should be pointed out in the conclusion. The conclusion should also, where appropriate, comment on the limits of the validity of the conclusion, given the scope of research.

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).

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 human rights essays include producing new knowledge based on original research (such as interviews), interpreting data from a human rights perspective or interpreting human rights theories, issues and practices in an original way.
- Insight and depth of understanding: These can be demonstrated by producing original, well-justified and substantiated arguments that directly address the research question.