

## Social and cultural anthropology

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 social and cultural anthropology provides students with an opportunity to develop an awareness of what constitutes a distinctively anthropological approach to the organization of human life in society and culture. Extended essays should be based on published ethnographic research. Students are expected to demonstrate, in the presentation of the research, their knowledge and understanding of the methods and aims of social and cultural anthropology.

### Choice of topic

Social and cultural anthropology is not a “residual” category for essays that do not fit into any other extended essay subject. Students must choose topics that lend themselves to anthropological investigation, and must carefully consider their choice of topic in terms of the assessment criteria.

An extended essay in social and cultural anthropology should analyse a topic from a theoretical or comparative perspective, based on the student’s own original analysis and on a solid understanding of the theoretical issues concerned. Students who intend to tackle comparative projects must be aware that research strategies involving two or more societies may call for greater narrowing of the research focus than a study in a single society. For example, a comparative analysis of Mexican and US views of death cannot be conducted successfully in the context of an extended essay because the topic is too broad. The research would have to be narrowed down by focusing, for example, on specific sub-groups of each society, as well as on a few well-chosen contrasting points, from which the student would identify underlying patterns and causes.

Extended essays that address issues in subfields of anthropology other than sociocultural anthropology, such as archeology, primatology or the study of human evolution, are not appropriate. Extended essays in linguistic anthropology are acceptable, provided that they demonstrate the student’s ability to analyse language in its sociocultural context. Students interested in conducting a research project in linguistic anthropology should be warned that such research frequently presumes a background in both sociocultural anthropology and linguistics.

Extended essays that seek to find solutions to social problems in an abstract fashion, that consist of polemic arguments for a particular position, or that present value judgments, are not appropriate. For example, the research question “Abortion: can one make a decision concerning the life of another human being?” cannot be analysed from the perspective of social and cultural anthropology.

Students must be aware that an emotional or experiential commitment to a particular issue can blunt their analysis of the topic. Personal commitment must be reinforced with intellectual and academic work, including explicit reference to what anthropologists have had to say about an issue. For instance, anthropologists have written a great deal about the role of women in Islam, so an essay that addresses the issue from a theological interpretation of sacred texts, or from journalistic accounts, will be marked down unless it frames the discussion within the context of anthropological research on religion and/or gender in specific societies.

The title of the extended essay must indicate a specific focus and problem, usually with reference to a specific group. Essay titles that are too general almost inevitably lead to a discussion that is inappropriately descriptive and superficial. In contrast, more tightly focused essay titles encourage clear expositions of ethnographic research conducted among specific groups, with an attention to theoretical implications.

The following examples of titles for social and cultural anthropology 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 Sioux sweat lodge: ethnic revival and New Age appropriations” **is better than** “Native American culture”.
- “Transnationalism and the labour market: South Asian workers in the Kuwaiti service industry” **is better than** “South Asians in the Middle East”.
- “Youth subculture, style and teenage rebellion: the politics of skateboarding in a French working-class suburb” **is better than** “Skateboarding as a hobby”.

Moreover, it may help if the student further defines the topic chosen for study in the form of a research question, followed by a statement of intent that indicates which broad process is going to be used in answering the question. In this way, the approach to the topic chosen may be even further clarified. Some examples of this could be as follows.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>A comparative analysis of the Inupiat and Gwich'in indigenous peoples of Alaska and their contrasting attitudes towards drilling in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge</b>
Research question	What are the cultural, economic and political factors that explain why one indigenous group supports drilling while another opposes it?
Approach	A comparison is made using published primary and secondary data to assess the claims and counterclaims made by the two indigenous groups. The study not only analyses what is stated by the indigenous peoples, but also assesses their statements in relation to their differing levels of acculturation and modernization.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Agency and structure: how women are heard through the veil in Lila Abu-Lughod's <i>Veiled Sentiments</i> and William C Young's <i>The Rashaayda Bedouin</i></b>
Research question	Do the theoretical concepts of agency and structure suffice to explain veiling among Muslim women in the two chosen ethnographies?
Approach	A comparison is made of two ethnographies dealing with the veiling of women. The comparison is theoretically developed by applying the concepts of structure and agency to understand the functions of veiling. The argument is then further refined with a counter to the structure and agency approach to veiling by applying a feminist approach to the understanding of veiling as revealed in the chosen ethnographies.

## Treatment of the topic

Students must clearly understand that social and cultural anthropology is a discipline with its own goals, methods and ways of posing questions, and that common sense is no substitute for a background in the subject. Students must make explicit reference to anthropological concepts and theory, and to their application in the investigation. Students should not attempt to prepare an extended essay in social and cultural anthropology if they have not studied the subject formally. Reading a textbook or consulting an encyclopedia while writing the extended essay will not compensate for a lack of background knowledge in the subject. Schools where social and cultural anthropology is not taught must be aware that students who submit extended essays in social and cultural anthropology with no formal exposure to the subject risk earning very low marks.

The presentation of anthropological materials must:

- go beyond a superficial description to analyse underlying patterns and causes—it must not merely summarize others' research findings
- analyse all selected ethnographic data in their social, cultural, political and historical contexts
- demonstrate a recognition of the methodological problems involved in the collection, evaluation and presentation of ethnographic data
- make explicit reference to the ethical issues appropriate to the investigation.

Frequent reference to the assessment criteria by both the supervisor and the student will help keep a sharper focus on the project.

## 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 social and cultural anthropology, this means that it must focus on a question that can be analysed using the theoretical underpinnings, analytical tools and methods of the discipline.

Although the aim of the essay can best be defined in the form of a question, it may also be presented as a statement or proposition for discussion.

### **Criterion B: introduction**

The introduction should relate the research question to existing subject knowledge: the student's personal experience or particular opinion is rarely relevant here.

### **Criterion C: investigation**

The investigation may focus on ethnographic materials selected by the student and placed in a comparative and theoretical context. Students may choose to analyse a topic from a theoretical or comparative perspective, drawing on published sources, both primary and secondary. Whatever the focus of the investigation, the student must provide an explicit description of the ethnographic context of the data. This should include a specific description of the group studied, location, time, social and political context, and the social and political positions of persons as revealed through their ethnographic accounts. The essay must place all data in a critical context that will demonstrate awareness of their relationship to other data that could have been gathered in the same context, and of the extent to which the observer's position helped to shape the data. Students are expected to demonstrate an understanding of the local–global dynamics relevant to the ethnographic material they analyse, and of the ethical dimensions of ethnographic fieldwork.

### **Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied**

The essay should integrate into the discussion clear and explicit evidence of specific and relevant anthropological reading. It should demonstrate a sound knowledge of anthropological concepts and theory relevant to the research question that is applied to the materials with a critical perspective. The essay should explicitly discuss methodological issues related to the collection, analysis and presentation of the ethnographic data.

### **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 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**

The student should move beyond mere description, and offer anthropologically sound generalizations and explanations for the data. The essay should include a clear discussion of underlying patterns and causes of an anthropological nature, and of their relationship to the data.

### **Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject**

Students should be aware of terminology specific to the discipline and be able to use this effectively. The knowledge that some terms are contested or may change their meaning over time should be incorporated into the essay where relevant.

### **Criterion H: conclusion**

“Consistent” is the key word here: the conclusion should develop out of the argument and not introduce new or extraneous matter. It should not repeat the material of the introduction; rather, it should present a new synthesis in light of the discussion.

## **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).

Students must provide a section and sub-section structure to their essays, with appropriate informative headings. 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 carefully acknowledged, with specific attention paid to the acknowledgment and referencing of quotes.

## **Criterion J: abstract**

The abstract is judged on the clarity with which it presents an overview of the research and the essay, not on the quality of the research question itself, nor on the quality of the argument or the conclusions.

## **Criterion K: holistic judgment**

Qualities that are rewarded under this criterion include intellectual initiative, insight and depth of understanding. Ways of demonstrating intellectual initiative in social and cultural anthropology include:

- judiciously choosing an appropriate topic and research question
- locating relevant resources
- devising an ethnographic, topic-based comparative or theoretical research project that demonstrates the rich possibilities of anthropological methods
- applying anthropological imagination to the analysis of the ethnographic material
- providing a layered account of the data that takes into consideration its social, political, economic, cultural, national and transnational dimensions
- approaching the research in a reflexive manner that identifies its strengths, shortcomings and ethical dimensions.