

Visual arts

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 visual arts provides students with an opportunity to undertake research in an area of the visual arts of particular interest to them.

The outcome of the research should be a coherent and structured piece of writing (with appropriate illustrations) that effectively addresses a particular issue or research question, appropriate to the visual arts (broadly defined also to include architecture, design and contemporary forms of visual culture). The research may be generated or inspired by the student’s direct experience of artwork, craftwork or design, or interest in the work of a particular artist, style or period. This might be related to the student’s own culture or another culture. Personal contact with artists, curators and so on is strongly encouraged, as is the use of local and/or primary sources.

Absolute reliance on textbooks and the Internet is discouraged and no extended essay in visual arts should be based exclusively on such sources. Textbooks should be consulted only insofar as they may stimulate original ideas, provide models of disciplined, structured and informed approaches, and encourage direct and personal involvement with the essay topic.

Choice of topic

Topics that are entirely dependent on summarizing general secondary sources (such as universal art history textbooks, and encyclopedias), and topics that are likely to lead to an essay that is essentially narrative or descriptive in nature, should be avoided. Biographical studies of artists must address a relevant issue or research question and arrive at a particular, and preferably personal, conclusion. Choosing a topic that covers many aspects of art history and/or a long period of time is also unlikely to result in a successful essay. Restricting the scope of the essay will help to ensure a clear focus and will provide opportunities for demonstrating detailed understanding and critical analysis.

The following examples of titles for visual arts 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).

- “How did Wassily Kandinsky use colour?” **is better than** “The Bauhaus”.
- “An analysis of African influences on Henry Moore” **is better than** “20th-century British sculpture”.
- “What is the artistic significance of recent poles raised by the First Nations of Haida-Gwai?” **is better than** “The art of Native North American people”.

- “Klimt’s use of gold” **is better than** “Sezession in Berlin”.
- “Robert Ntila’s etching techniques: a critical investigation” **is better than** “Contemporary East African art”.

It may help if the student defines the topic chosen for study in the form of a more specific 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 include the following.

Topic	Cultural influences on Pablo Picasso’s work
Research question	Picasso: individual genius or cultural thief?
Approach	An investigation of the extent to which selected images in Picasso’s work may have been appropriated from other cultural sources.
Topic	The influence of Renaissance architecture in Montreal
Research question	Cathédrale Marie-Reine-du-Monde, Montreal: a replica of St Peter’s, Rome?
Approach	An original investigation into the stylistic similarities in the architecture of these two buildings.
Topic	The impact of immigration on an artist’s work
Research question	What is the impact of transcultural experience on the art of Gu Xiong?
Approach	An investigation into the effects of migration on a selected artist’s work.

Treatment of the topic

It is essential that the topic chosen is clearly and directly related to visual arts. If the connection is only incidental, students risk introducing material that is of only marginal relevance, and will confuse the inquiry and weaken the argument. Students should be encouraged to formulate a research question of personal interest and to draw on a variety of sources to support their arguments, such as textual analysis, study of original artworks or designed artifacts, and interviews with practitioners or authorities on the subject. Students should be helped to identify and choose appropriate sources, both primary and secondary, and appropriate methods of research. Research questions that do not allow a systematic investigation that demonstrates critical artistic analysis and detailed understanding are unlikely to be suitable. In some instances, it may become clear at an early stage in the research that too few sources are available to permit such an investigation. In such cases, a change of focus should be made.

The inclusion and discussion of appropriate visual reference material is of particular importance in visual arts extended essays. Such material must, however, be directly supportive of, and relevant to, the analysis/argument. It should be neatly presented, properly acknowledged, and should appear in the body of the essay, as close as possible to the first reference.

In order to promote personal involvement in the extended essay, the use of local and/or primary sources should be encouraged wherever possible. However, it is appreciated that, in certain situations, students may not necessarily have access to primary sources. In such situations, reproductions, videos, films or photographs/Internet images of a high quality are considered acceptable sources. An argument should be well substantiated, with comments and conclusions supported by evidence that is relevant and well founded, not based simply on the student's preconceptions.

Students are expected to evaluate critically the resources consulted during the process of writing the essay by asking themselves the following questions.

- Which sources are vital to the support of my ideas, opinions and assertions?
- Which sources do not contribute to the analysis?

Many different approaches to the research question can be appropriate, for instance:

- use of primary sources (artwork and artists) and secondary sources (material **about** the visual arts) in order to establish and appraise varying interpretations
- analysing sources (primary and secondary) in order to explore and explain particular aspects of the visual arts
- using primary source material for an analysis, with emphasis on a particular aspect of visual arts
- collecting and analysing reproductions of artwork, possibly leading to a comparison of similar or different images.

Students should also demonstrate awareness of other issues surrounding the art studied.

- Do I show an awareness of the value and limitations of the art I am studying through analysing its origin and purpose?
- Do I show a consistently good artistic understanding in setting the research question into context and addressing it fully and effectively?

Relevant outcomes of this analysis should be integrated into the student's argument.

The argument should also be well substantiated:

- With what evidence do I support my comments and conclusions?
- Is this evidence relevant and well founded, and not based simply on my preconceptions?

Finally, an extended essay in visual arts is a formal essay, so students must pay very careful attention to the requirements of the assessment criteria.

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 can often be best defined in the form of a question. It may, however, also be presented as a statement or proposition for discussion. It must be:

- specific and sharply focused
- appropriate to the visual arts (broadly defined also to include architecture, design and contemporary forms of visual culture) and not of a trivial nature
- centred on the visual arts and not on peripheral issues such as biography
- stated clearly early on in the essay.

Criterion B: introduction

The introduction should explain succinctly the significance of the topic, why it is worthy of investigation, and how the research question relates to existing knowledge on the topic.

The introduction should not be seen as an opportunity for padding out an essay with a lengthy account of an artist's life.

Criterion C: investigation

The range of resources available will be influenced by various factors, but above all by the topic.

Students should use in the first instance primary sources (artwork, exhibitions, architecture, interviews), with secondary sources (textbooks and the comments of other artists, critics, art historians) as evidential support. It is expected that visual material (sometimes including the student's own photographs) will be included and properly referenced.

The proper planning of an essay should involve interrogating source material in light of the research question, so that the views of other art scholars and artists are used to support the student's own argument, and not as a substitute for that argument. It may thus be helpful for a student to challenge a statement by an art scholar (historian or critic), in reference to the art being studied, instead of simply agreeing with it, where there is evidence to support such a challenge.

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

Students should demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the visual arts by discussing formal artistic aspects (for example, elements and principles of design) and considering historical, social and cultural contexts. Some of this knowledge and understanding should be based at least partially on primary sources.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

Students should be aware of the need to give their essays the backbone of a developing argument in which the essay is grounded in an understanding of the relevant and wider historical and sociocultural context. Personal views should not simply be stated but need to be supported by reasoned argument, often with reference to illustrations, to persuade the reader of their validity. Straightforward descriptive or narrative accounts that lack analysis (for example, a simple recounting of an artist's life) do not usually advance an argument and should be avoided. Good essays are those that have something interesting to communicate, where there is evidence of original thought, and where students are able to substantiate their ideas and opinions.

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

There should be strong evidence of a thorough knowledge of the visual arts aspects of the topic, and the essay should successfully incorporate and discuss visual images.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject

There should be evidence of familiarity with, and the accurate and effective use of, visual arts terminology. Appropriate vocabulary must be used to describe historical periods, artistic styles and so on.

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, appropriate (and acknowledged) visual images, 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, visual references—are deemed no better than satisfactory (maximum level 2), while essays that omit two of them are deemed poor at best (maximum level 1). Within the visual arts, the "look" as well as the "craft" of the essay is given consideration.

In visual arts essays, illustrations should appear in the body of the essay, as close as possible to their first reference.

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 the following.

- Intellectual initiative: Ways of demonstrating this in visual arts essays include the choice of topic and research question, and locating and using a wide range of sources, including some that may have been little used previously or generated for the study (for instance, transcripts of interviews with artists and collectors).
- 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.
- Creativity: In visual arts essays, this includes qualities such as new and inventive approaches to artistic analysis, new approaches to “well-worn” or popular topics, or attention to new topics and questions.