

World religions

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

Overview

Extended essays in world religions provide students with the opportunity to undertake an in-depth investigation into a limited topic within the field of world religions. The study should integrate disciplined research that is informed by scholarly methods with original and imaginative analysis, interpretation, and critical evaluation of the results of that research.

Students who are considering submitting an extended essay in world religions are strongly advised to study carefully a copy of the Diploma Programme syllabus for this subject, 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.

World religions comprises a systematic, critical, yet sensitive study of the variety of beliefs, values and practices encountered in religions around the world. A rigorous attempt is made to maintain objectivity in the analysis and evaluation of religions. This requires, at the very least, an authentic attempt to understand the beliefs, values and practices of the religion being studied by using language and concepts drawn from that religious tradition. Essays that are primarily a defence or critique of the beliefs, values and practices of a particular religious tradition, or that explain or evaluate religious phenomena from the standpoint of another religious tradition or of a secularist ideology, are unacceptable.

The concern is not just with what the followers of a faith believe and do, but also with an understanding of why they do so, through an appreciation of the form of life and world outlook that they constitute. The result of writing an essay in world religions should be, among other things, improved intercultural understanding.

Choice of topic

Essentially, students may choose to answer any well-defined question about any of the world’s religions, present or past, subject to the following guidelines.

- Topics must be appropriate to the subject. Extended essays must address the beliefs, values and practices of religious traditions and show a genuine understanding of the religion from the standpoint of its adherents. Essays that are only indirectly related to religion—for example, legal issues relating to school prayer, the wearing of religious symbols, or the scientific validity of “creation science”—are not acceptable.
- It should be made clear to students who have not followed a course in world religions, and who are, therefore, unfamiliar with the discipline and its methodology, that an essay in world religions is not an opportunity to write an essay of a confessional, evangelizing, or apologetic nature. This means that students should avoid topics that involve making judgments about the truth-value of religious beliefs.

- Essays should not be purely descriptive but should shed some light on why people believe and/or act as they do, or on the relationship between the religion and the culture of which it is a part. Students should ideally either have taken a course in the discipline or spent some time in independent study, preferably with a mentor who has significant background in the discipline.
- The research question should be well defined. Topics that are too broad nearly always result in essays that are superficial, purely descriptive, and riddled with errors and misconceptions.
- The research question should permit investigation using a method or approach that the student is capable of completing successfully, given his or her level of training, and the time and resources available. In other words, students should not plan an essay that requires access to unobtainable or unreadable primary sources, or that requires a larger number of in-depth interviews than there is time to carry out.

The most successful essays generally focus on the analysis or interpretation of a particular religious text, image, ritual or practice, or examine the significance of a well-defined concept in a particular religious tradition. Some examples of this could include the following.

Topic	The politics of religious symbols in France
Research question	Why do some high school students in France wear religious symbols to school? Why do many people in France object?
Approach	An in-depth interview study of attitudes towards wearing religious symbols in public schools in France.

Topic	Creationism
Research question	Why is the doctrine of creation so central to contemporary evangelical Protestantism?
Approach	An analysis of the understanding of the doctrine of creation and its relationship to other doctrines in the work of three contemporary evangelical theologians.

Topic	Prophecy
Research question	What are the differences in the understanding of prophecy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam?
Approach	A study of the usage of the Hebrew, Greek and Arabic words translated into English as “prophet” in selected texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament and the Koran.

Topic	Prayer in public schools
Research question	How do high school students in South Carolina experience school prayer and its prohibition?
Approach	An in-depth interview study of the attitudes and experience of South Carolina high school students regarding school prayer.

Topic	Sacred spaces
Research question	What is the difference between a Catholic church and a mosque?
Approach	An ethnographic study incorporating observation and interviews of believers visiting both types of sacred space, informed by background reading of theological texts addressing the question from both traditions.

Treatment of the topic

The first step in preparing an extended essay is to formulate a well-defined research question. Essays that pose a question that might reasonably be answered in different ways are generally better than those that simply discuss a topic, even one within the limits defined above. The best research questions are those that indicate familiarity with existing research and with the larger concerns of the discipline.

Many methods of investigation are possible. Students might, for instance:

- analyse and interpret a sacred text, image, or ritual
- analyse the role of a particular doctrine within one or more theological systems
- conduct in-depth interviews in order to understand how ordinary believers approach a particular religious belief or practice.

Students should be careful to obtain the permission of the leaders of religious communities before observing services and rituals, and should obtain the permission of everyone they interview, making it clear how the results will be used and how, if at all, the interviewees will be identified.

Students are encouraged to use both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources should be consulted in order to locate the topic being studied within a broader context, and to gain an understanding of various methods of investigation, analysis, interpretation and argument. The best essays generally test these established positions against primary sources or data collected for the extended essay.

Supervisors should make sure that students have at least a basic grasp of the scholarly methods needed to interpret primary sources—for example, literary, source and historical-critical approaches to sacred texts, formal and iconographic analysis of visual images, various approaches to the interpretation of rituals. While it is understood that students are just beginning their study of world religions and are not expected to have a complete mastery of methodological issues, essays that contain naïve analyses and interpretations that reflect no training, and could have been prepared without any formal study, will not receive high scores.

It is important that methods of investigation and analysis are appropriate to the topic and well executed. In-depth interviews are an excellent way of finding out how ordinary members of a religious community actually understand and experience their religion, but a study of this sort must involve a significant number of interviews with a diverse cross-section of the population being studied. Interviews should not be used naïvely as a source regarding the “official teachings” of a religious institution: simply supplementing readings of secondary sources with a few interviews with local clergy accomplishes very little.

Comparisons between **well-defined** aspects of two or more different religions are permissible, but students must take great care to ensure that the comparisons are, on the one hand, genuine, clear and specific, and, on the other, a manifestation of sensitive and objective analysis. It is important to understand that different religions do not always pose competing answers to the same questions, but actually pose different questions, making comparative approaches difficult at best. Should the student or the supervisor have any doubts about the student's ability to meet these criteria, a comparative study should be avoided. Comparison in religious studies means the comparing of ideas or practices, not the making of value judgments such as "Buddhist meditation is more effective than Christian prayer".

Students should be aware that few religious traditions are monolithic, and so naïve analyses of "Christianity" or "Buddhism" are unlikely to attain the depth necessary for an excellent extended essay. Students should be as specific as possible about exactly what they are studying.

The results of the investigation, analysis and interpretation should be presented in the form of a well-written, well-organized argument that supports a clear and well-defined answer to the research question. Logical links and relationships between ideas should be spelled out. The conclusions should show an understanding of the wider implications of the research.

The use of materials such as drawings, pictures and photographs should be encouraged where they appropriately illustrate the discussion/argument. These should be included in the essay in a way that makes the intended point, and this point should be spelled out clearly in the analysis, interpretation and argument. When such materials are derived from another source, that source must be acknowledged.

Interpreting the assessment criteria

Criterion A: research question

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. The research question must be appropriate to the particular subject in which the essay is submitted. In world religions, this means that it must in some way address the beliefs, values and practices of one or more religious traditions, and show some understanding of world religions as a discipline. Questions that, by their very nature, require a defence or critique of the beliefs, values or practices of a particular religious tradition, or that properly belong in another discipline because the issues being addressed are scientific, legal or political, receive a score of zero.

Criterion B: introduction

The introduction should situate the research question in the context of existing research in the discipline of world religions (including the specific sub-discipline in which the topic of the essay is located). The student's personal experience or particular opinion is rarely relevant here.

Criterion C: investigation

Essays submitted in world religions should show familiarity with the existing literature and with scholarly methods appropriate to the specific research question being addressed. The use of primary sources, especially sacred texts, should reflect at least a basic sensitivity to problems of analysis and interpretation. Naïve readings of religious texts receive lower scores than those that are informed by an understanding of historical-critical, source-critical, and literary-critical or other relevant issues. The same is true for the interpretation of survey or interview material, observations of religious rituals or even theological texts, which must not be treated naïvely as representative or authoritative.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Higher scores are given to essays that show:

- a broad familiarity with the discipline and relevant scholarly methods, including, especially, knowledge obtained from the proper use of primary sources or scholarly secondary sources
- an understanding of how the religion looks from the inside
- some element of unique insight or innovation.

Lower scores are given to essays that show little or no knowledge of the topic, that are full of misconceptions that would have been resolved by even cursory study, or that reflect only a confessional perspective, catechetical formation, or basic factual knowledge of the kind that might be obtained from world religions textbooks or encyclopedia articles.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

To meet the requirements of this criterion, students should ensure that the argument is appropriate to the discipline and the specific scholarly methods used.

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

World religions is a diverse discipline and this criterion measures the extent to which, and the effectiveness with which, the student uses methods appropriate to the specific research question. Depending on the question, this might mean the historical-critical analysis and interpretation of sacred texts, the use of statistical methods in analysing survey data, the use of “thick description” or “interpretive understanding” to evaluate in-depth interview or participant observation material, or the use of philosophical or theological argument to address a disputed question. The highest scores are given to essays that both choose the correct methods and use them effectively.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject

In world religions, the use of language must reflect an understanding both of the religious tradition studied, as experienced by believers, and of the discipline of world religions.

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. The best conclusions will identify new questions arising from the research or will reflect on its larger significance. In world religions, this might mean its significance for the discipline or its implications for the religious tradition studied or the larger communities of which it is a part.

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).

In applying this criterion, attention should be paid to standards for citing sources and other evidence used by scholars in the discipline using comparable methods of investigation and the particular religious tradition studied. Sacred texts are, for example, generally cited differently to other sources (for example, chapter and verse rather than page numbers). The Koran and Buddhist sutras are cited differently to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Other forms of evidence—ethnographic observations, survey research or in-depth interviews—should be cited in a manner standard for the discipline.

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 world religions essays include originality in the choice of topic and research question and in the development of the essay, locating and using sources that have been little used previously (assuming standard sources have also been mastered) or that are generated for the study (for instance, ethnographic observations or in-depth interviews), sophistication in the analysis and interpretation of that evidence, and taking new approaches to popular topics (possibly achieved through evaluation of varying historical explanations).
- Insight and depth of understanding: These can be demonstrated by setting the research question appropriately in the context of ongoing debates within the discipline of world religions, by the effective use of appropriate research methods, and by creativity in the development of the argument and conclusion. It can also be demonstrated by conveying to the reader a sense of how the religion feels from the inside.