

ECLASSOPEDIA

IB Insight Series | 2026 Edition

How IB Grading Actually Works

Demystified

A complete, honest, and practical guide to understanding IB assessment, grade boundaries, internal and external evaluations, the diploma point system, and what it all means for your future.

Introduction: The IB Grading Myth

Every year, thousands of students begin the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme with a mix of excitement and anxiety. The IB has a reputation — sometimes feared, sometimes revered — for being one of the most rigorous pre-university programmes in the world. And at the centre of that reputation sits its grading system: a mysterious, seemingly complex web of scores, grade boundaries, internal assessments, and bonus points.

The most common misconception students carry into the IB is this: 'If I score 80% on my exam, I get a 7.' That is not how IB grading works. Not even close.

The IB operates on a criterion-referenced system combined with statistical moderation, norm-referencing adjustments, and a points-based diploma structure. It rewards depth of understanding, not rote memorisation. It rewards intellectual risk-taking, original thinking, and the ability to apply knowledge across unfamiliar contexts.

This guide — produced by Eclassopedia for 2026 — tears down the myths and explains, step by step, exactly how IB grading works from the moment you sit your Paper 1 to the moment you receive your final diploma results.

Why This Matters in 2026

University admission requirements, scholarship criteria, and global recognition of the IB Diploma continue to evolve rapidly. Understanding exactly how you are graded — and how to strategise accordingly — is one of the most powerful advantages you can give yourself as a 2026 IB candidate.

Section 1: The IB Grading Scale — What the Numbers Actually Mean

The IB uses a 1–7 grading scale for each subject. There is no 0, no A/B/C, no percentages on your final transcript. Each subject you study — whether it is Mathematics: Analysis and Approaches, History, Biology, or Visual Arts — receives a final grade from 1 to 7.

The Grade Descriptors

Each grade is described by the IB using qualitative language, not just a number. Here is what each grade officially represents in 2026:

Grade	Score Range	Description	University Perception
7	80–100%	Excellent	Outstanding — top universities globally
6	70–79%	Very Good	Strong — competitive for most programs
5	55–69%	Good	Solid — meets most admission requirements
4	45–54%	Satisfactory	Acceptable — basic university threshold
3	35–44%	Mediocre	Below average — may require explanation
2	25–34%	Poor	Weak — rarely meets university standards
1	0–24%	Very Poor	Failing — does not meet requirements

The critical thing to understand is that these grades are not directly tied to a fixed percentage. A 7 in one session might require 78%, while a 7 in another session might require 83%. Why? Because of grade boundaries — one of the most misunderstood aspects of IB assessment.

What Are Grade Boundaries?

Grade boundaries are the minimum raw marks required to achieve each grade in a given examination session. They are set after the exams have been taken and marked, not before. This is a deliberate feature of the IB system designed to account for variation in paper difficulty across sessions.

For example, if Paper 1 for Chemistry HL in the May 2026 session was judged by examiners to be slightly harder than average, the grade boundary for a 7 might be set at 75 out of 100 rather than 80. This protects students from being penalised for sitting a harder paper.

Key Insight

Grade boundaries are set by IB Chief Examiners after reviewing statistical distributions, examiner feedback, and the difficulty of each question. You will never see these boundaries in advance — they are confirmed and published only when results are released.

The Raw Mark to Grade Conversion

Your raw marks across all components of a subject are combined into a final composite score. This composite is then mapped against the grade boundaries to produce your 1–7 grade. The exact weighting of each component varies by subject and level — HL and SL subjects often have different compositions.

This is why 'just getting 70%' is a flawed strategy. Different subjects, different sessions, and different components all have different boundaries. What you need is a deep understanding of each assessment component you face.

Section 2: The Anatomy of an IB Subject Assessment

Every IB subject is assessed through a combination of external and internal components. The exact structure varies enormously between subjects, but the underlying logic is consistent: examiners want to measure your ability to think, analyse, and apply — not just recall.

External Assessments: The Written Exams

External assessments are your traditional written examinations, taken under controlled conditions in May or November, and marked by trained IB examiners from around the world. These are standardised, meaning every student sitting the same paper faces exactly the same questions.

Most IB subjects have two or three external papers. For example:

- Mathematics: Analysis and Approaches HL has Papers 1, 2, and 3 — each testing different skills at different levels of complexity.
- English A: Literature HL has Papers 1 and 2 — one unseen commentary, one essay on studied works.
- Biology HL has Papers 1, 2, and 3 — multiple choice, data analysis, and short/long answer.

External exams typically account for 75–80% of your final grade, though the precise figure depends on the subject.

Internal Assessments: The IA

The Internal Assessment is one of the IB's most distinctive and most misunderstood components. The IA is a significant piece of independent work — a research report, experiment, investigation, oral examination, or portfolio — that is:

- Completed during your two years of study (not under exam conditions)
- Marked by your own teacher using IB criteria
- Moderated by an external IB examiner to ensure consistency

The IA typically accounts for 20–25% of your final subject grade. For some subjects, such as Visual Arts and Music, the proportion is even higher. The IA is your opportunity to demonstrate independent intellectual inquiry — to go beyond the syllabus and show the IB what you can do when given academic freedom.

Common IA Mistake

Many students underestimate the IA because it doesn't have the pressure of a timed exam. This is a mistake. A poorly executed IA can drop your subject grade by one or even two points. A well-executed IA, on the other hand, can be the margin that pushes you from a 6 to a 7.

Assessment Weighting Overview

Assessment Type	HL Weight	SL Weight	Conducted By
External Exams (Paper 1, 2, 3)	80%	80%	IB Examiners
Internal Assessment (IA)	20%	20%	Teachers + Moderated
Extended Essay (EE)	Bonus Points	Bonus Points	IB Examiners
Theory of Knowledge (TOK)	Bonus Points	Bonus Points	IB Examiners

Paper Types and What They Test

IB papers are not uniform. The IB designs each paper type to test a specific cognitive skill:

Paper 1 — Knowledge and Comprehension

Paper 1 in most sciences consists of multiple choice questions designed to test foundational knowledge across the syllabus. In humanities like History, Paper 1 is typically a source-based paper testing your ability to analyse primary documents for bias, origin, purpose, and value.

Paper 2 — Application and Analysis

Paper 2 typically demands extended written responses. In Sciences, this means data analysis and structured questions. In Humanities, this is where your essay-writing skills are tested — you must construct arguments, deploy evidence, and evaluate historiographical or theoretical perspectives.

Paper 3 — Synthesis and Evaluation (HL Only)

Paper 3 is exclusive to Higher Level students in most subjects. It is the most demanding paper, requiring students to synthesise knowledge across the syllabus, evaluate competing arguments, and often engage with unfamiliar material. For sciences, this includes experimental design questions. For history, it tests in-depth regional or thematic knowledge.

Section 3: HL vs SL — The Level Difference and What It Means for Your Grades

Every IB student studies six subjects across two levels: Higher Level (HL) and Standard Level (SL). You must take at least three — and no more than four — at HL. The choice of HL subjects is one of the most consequential decisions you will make in the IB.

How HL and SL Grading Differ

HL and SL are graded on the same 1–7 scale, but they are not directly comparable in terms of difficulty, content coverage, or expected performance. HL courses cover approximately 30–40% more content than SL courses, include more complex paper types (like Paper 3), and generally require a deeper level of analysis and synthesis.

Crucially, HL and SL have separate grade boundaries, set independently. A 7 at HL requires a different raw mark than a 7 at SL, and the two cannot be directly compared as percentages.

The Strategic Dimension of HL vs SL

Most competitive universities require specific HL subjects with minimum grade thresholds. A medical school applicant, for example, may need Chemistry HL and Biology HL with a minimum of 6 in each. Understanding this is essential for subject selection.

Eclassopedia's 2026 strategic advice: Choose your HL subjects based on three criteria in this order of priority:

- University requirements for your target programmes
- Your personal strengths and genuine interest in the subject
- The availability of strong teaching and support at your school

Do not choose HL subjects based on peer pressure, prestige alone, or the assumption that HL always impresses universities more. A 7 at SL in a relevant subject often outweighs a 4 at HL.

Section 4: The Diploma Points System — Adding It All Up

To receive the IB Diploma, you must earn enough points across your six subjects and additional diploma requirements to meet the minimum threshold. This is where the grading system gets its most important practical dimension.

Subject Points

Each of your six subjects is awarded a grade from 1 to 7. The maximum you can earn from your six subjects is 42 points (6 subjects × 7 points). The minimum required to receive the Diploma — subject to additional conditions — is typically 24 points.

Bonus Points: TOK and the Extended Essay

Two of the most unique elements of the IB Diploma Programme are the Theory of Knowledge (TOK) course and the Extended Essay (EE). These are not graded on the 1–7 scale. Instead, they are awarded grades of A, B, C, D, or E, and together they can contribute up to 3 bonus points to your total score, bringing the absolute maximum to 45 points.

The bonus point matrix works as follows:

	EE: A	EE: B	EE: C/D
TOK: A	3	3	2
TOK: B	3	2	2
TOK: C	2	2	1
TOK: D	2	1	0

The E Grade — Automatic Diploma Failure

An E grade in either TOK or the Extended Essay is an automatic condition for diploma failure, regardless of your subject scores. An E means you receive no bonus points and you fail to meet the minimum diploma conditions. The EE and TOK are not optional extras — they are diploma requirements.

Diploma Conditions — Beyond the Points Total

Earning 24 points is a necessary but not sufficient condition for receiving the IB Diploma. You must also meet all of the following conditions:

- No grade of 1 in any subject
- No more than two grades of 2 across all six subjects
- No grade of E in TOK or the Extended Essay
- CAS (Creativity, Activity, Service) requirements must be fulfilled
- At least 12 points earned from HL subjects (if taking three HL subjects, minimum average of 4 per HL subject)
- At least 9 points earned from SL subjects

These conditions mean that a student can theoretically score 28 points but still not receive the Diploma if, for example, they received a grade of 1 in one subject or failed to submit their CAS documentation.

Section 5: The Moderation Process — How Your IA is Really Marked

Internal Assessment moderation is one of the least understood aspects of IB grading and one of the most consequential. Here is exactly how it works.

Step 1: Teacher Marking

Your teacher marks your IA using official IB criteria and mark schemes. Teachers are trained to apply these criteria, but they are human — and individual teachers interpret criteria slightly differently. Two teachers at different schools might award different marks for the same piece of work.

Step 2: Sample Submission to the IB

Your school submits a sample of IAs to the IB for external moderation. The sample is chosen by the IB's system — typically including the highest, lowest, and a selection of middle-range pieces from your cohort. The IB's external moderator then marks these same IAs independently.

Step 3: Moderation Adjustment

The moderator compares their marks with your teacher's marks. If there is a consistent discrepancy — for example, your teacher systematically marked 3 points higher than the moderator on every piece — then an adjustment is applied to the entire cohort's IA scores.

Important Reality

Moderation adjustments can go up or down. If your teacher was consistently generous, your IA mark may be reduced. If your teacher was consistently strict, your IA mark may increase. This adjustment is applied to the whole school cohort, not individual students.

Step 4: Final IA Contribution

The moderated IA mark is then converted into a score out of the total marks available for that component and combined with your external exam marks to produce a final composite score. This composite is mapped against grade boundaries to produce your final 1–7 grade.

Section 6: The May vs November Session — Does It Matter?

The IB runs two examination sessions each year: May (for students in the Northern Hemisphere academic calendar) and November (primarily for Southern Hemisphere students, particularly in Australia and parts of Africa). There is a widespread myth that one session is significantly easier or harder than the other. The truth is more nuanced.

How Session Comparison Works

The IB uses statistical equating processes to ensure that a 7 in May represents the same standard of achievement as a 7 in November. Grade boundaries are set independently for each session. A paper that is slightly harder in one session will have its grade boundaries adjusted accordingly.

What does vary between sessions is the pool of students sitting the examination. November sittings tend to have smaller, more localised cohorts. May sittings are global and involve the vast majority of IB students worldwide. This affects the statistical distribution of scores but not the standard being assessed.

Retake Sittings and Their Implications

If you do not receive the Diploma in your first sitting, you may retake either individual subject examinations or re-sit the full diploma in the next available session. For retakes, only the highest grade in each component is used — your school-submitted IA mark may be carried over unless you choose to resubmit it. Understanding these rules is critical for strategic retake planning.

Section 7: How Universities Actually Read Your IB Score

All the grading mechanics we have covered lead to this: what does your final score actually mean when a university admissions officer opens your file? This is where the theory meets reality.

The 45-Point Scale as a Global Currency

The IB Diploma's 45-point scale is recognised by universities in over 150 countries. Unlike A-Levels, APs, or national leaving certificates, the IB provides a single, internationally comparable qualification. Top universities around the world have developed specific entry requirements expressed in IB points.

As of 2026, indicative point requirements at globally competitive universities typically range as follows:

- 38–42 points: Required for the most competitive programmes at universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, MIT, and equivalent institutions
- 34–37 points: Competitive for strong programmes at leading national universities in the UK, USA, Canada, Singapore, and Europe
- 30–33 points: Meets requirements for most solid university programmes worldwide
- 24–29 points: Satisfies basic university entry requirements in many countries

Note for 2026 Applicants

Entry requirements change every year. Always verify specific requirements directly with each university for the 2026 admissions cycle. The figures above are indicative only and subject to change.

Subject-Specific Requirements

Many universities do not simply look at your total points. They scrutinise your performance at HL in the specific subjects relevant to your intended programme. A student applying to study Engineering at a top university will be assessed on their performance in Mathematics and Physics at HL — a 6 in Mathematics HL may be mandatory, regardless of their overall diploma score.

This is why Eclassopedia consistently advises students: research the specific HL requirements of your target universities before you finalise your IB subject choices. Generic IB advice is not enough.

The Predicted Grade System

Universities in the UK, many European countries, and increasingly globally, use predicted grades as the basis for conditional offers. Predicted grades are your teachers' forecasts of the final grade you will achieve in each subject — submitted to universities typically in the autumn of your Diploma Year 2.

The accuracy and credibility of predicted grades varies significantly between schools. Universities are aware of this and have access to historical data about grade inflation and accuracy at IB schools worldwide. This is why consistent in-class performance, internal assessments, and mock examination results matter enormously — they are the evidence base your teachers use to predict your grades.

Section 8: Common Grading Misconceptions — Debunked

After working with thousands of IB students across the world, Eclassopedia has identified the most persistent and damaging misconceptions about IB grading. Here they are, addressed directly.

Misconception 1: 'I Need 45 Points to Get Into a Top University'

False. A score of 45 is exceptional and rare — typically achieved by fewer than 1% of candidates globally. Most students admitted to the world's most competitive universities have scores in the

38–42 range. Chasing perfection at the expense of strategic performance in your most important subjects is a common and costly mistake.

Misconception 2: 'The IA Doesn't Really Matter'

False. For many subjects, the IA represents 20% or more of your final grade. The difference between a well-executed and a poorly executed IA can be the difference between a 5 and a 7 in that subject. The IA is also the component over which you have the most control — use it.

Misconception 3: 'Grade Boundaries Are Fixed Every Year'

False. Grade boundaries are set fresh each examination session by Chief Examiners after the papers have been marked. They are not predetermined. They respond to the difficulty of the paper and the distribution of student performance. You cannot predict exact boundaries in advance — but understanding how they work helps you calibrate your preparation.

Misconception 4: 'TOK and the EE Don't Affect My Grade Much'

Dangerously false. While TOK and the EE contribute a maximum of 3 bonus points, failing either with an E grade results in automatic diploma failure. Students who dismiss these components as secondary often find themselves with a non-diploma result, regardless of their subject scores. Treat the EE and TOK as the substantial academic endeavours they are designed to be.

Misconception 5: 'SL Subjects Are Easy — I Can Neglect Them'

False. The diploma conditions require at least 9 points from SL subjects. A student who gets a 3 in an SL subject — particularly if combined with another low score — may fail the diploma conditions even with strong HL performance. Every subject matters.

Section 9: Practical Strategies for Maximising Your IB Grade

Understanding the grading system is only valuable if it translates into better performance. Here is Eclassopedia's 2026 strategic framework for IB students who want to maximise their outcomes.

Strategy 1: Prioritise Your HL Subjects

Your HL subjects carry the most weight in terms of university requirements and are worth the most in terms of effort allocation. If you are strong in your HL subjects, you are much better positioned than a student with mediocre HL grades but strong SL grades.

Strategy 2: Start Your IA Early and Iterate

The Internal Assessment is a marathon, not a sprint. Begin your IA planning in Year 1 of the Diploma. Use feedback from your teacher early. Submit drafts. Understand the marking criteria thoroughly — not just the descriptors, but the exemplars. An IA completed with genuine intellectual curiosity and methodological rigor will always outperform a last-minute submission.

Strategy 3: Use Past Papers Strategically

Past papers are not just practice — they are data. When you analyse past papers, you are learning the examiner's language: the command terms, the expectation for each question type, the structure of a model answer. Eclassopedia recommends starting past paper practice at the end of Year 1 and building to full timed exams in Year 2.

Strategy 4: Understand Command Terms

Every IB question contains a command term — 'analyse', 'evaluate', 'compare and contrast', 'to what extent', 'discuss'. These terms are not interchangeable. The IB has published official definitions for every command term, and examiners assess your response based on whether you have met the requirements of that specific command. Students who understand command terms typically outperform those who do not, regardless of their knowledge level.

Strategy 5: Do Not Sacrifice the Extended Essay

The Extended Essay is 4,000 words of independent research on a topic of your choosing, submitted at the end of Year 1 or early Year 2. Students who approach it as a checkbox exercise typically

receive C or D grades and earn zero or one bonus point. Students who approach it as a genuine intellectual investigation — choosing a topic they are passionate about, developing a focused research question, engaging with real academic sources — typically earn A or B grades and the maximum three bonus points from their TOK/EE combination.

Strategy 6: Track Your Progress Against Grade Boundaries

While exact grade boundaries are not available in advance, historical boundaries for each subject are published by the IB and available through Eclassopedia's resources. Use these to calibrate your progress. If past years show that a 7 in your subject typically requires around 75% on the external papers, you know the benchmark you are aiming for.

Section 10: The Results Day Experience — What to Expect

IB results are released twice a year: in early July (for the May session) and in early January (for the November session). Results are made available online through the IB's Candidate Results system. This is one of the most anticipated and sometimes anxiety-inducing moments of a young person's academic life. Understanding what to expect can help.

What You Will See

Your results page will show your grade (1–7) for each of your six subjects, your TOK and EE grades, your total diploma points, and whether you have been awarded the Diploma or the Course Results (the latter for students who did not receive the full diploma).

If Results Are Not What You Expected

The IB offers two mechanisms for students who believe their results do not reflect their performance: Enquiry Upon Results (EUR) and Remark.

An Enquiry Upon Results requests a clerical check — verifying that all marks were added correctly and that no scripts were missing. A Remark requests that a senior examiner re-marks your paper.

Re-marks can result in a grade going up, staying the same, or — in rare cases — going down. The deadline for requesting these services is tight, typically within two weeks of results day.

Eclassopedia Advice on Remarks

Only request a remark if you have a specific, evidence-based reason to believe the marking was incorrect — not simply because you expected a higher grade. Speak to your school's IB coordinator first. They have access to detailed feedback on your performance that can help you make an informed decision.

Conclusion: The IB Grading System Is Designed to Serve You

The IB grading system, at its best, is not a gatekeeping mechanism — it is an assessment framework designed to recognise genuine academic achievement, intellectual development, and the ability to think independently across multiple disciplines. It rewards students who engage deeply with their subjects, who approach the Extended Essay as a real research challenge, who treat the Internal Assessment as an opportunity rather than an obligation, and who understand that education is more than exam performance.

But understanding how it works is not optional. The students who thrive in the IB — and who emerge with diploma scores that open doors to the world's leading universities — are the ones who understand the system thoroughly, plan strategically, and execute consistently over two years.

Eclassopedia publishes this guide every year with one purpose: to give every IB student, regardless of their school, their country, or their access to resources, the same quality of strategic insight that the most well-resourced IB students in the world receive.

The IB is challenging. It is designed to be. But with the right understanding — of how your grades are calculated, how grade boundaries work, how moderation functions, how the diploma point system adds up, and how universities interpret your results — you are equipped to navigate it with clarity and confidence.

Good luck. You have got this.

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