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IB Extended Essay Series | 2026 Edition

How to Choose a Good EE Topic

A Complete Step-by-Step Guide for IB Students

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Introduction: Why Your EE Topic Choice Matters More Than You Think

The International Baccalaureate Extended Essay (EE) is one of the most significant academic undertakings in a student's IB journey. Spanning 4,000 words, it demands rigorous research, critical thinking, and the ability to sustain a focused argument over an extended period. Yet, the single decision that will most profoundly shape your experience — and your final grade — is made right at the beginning: choosing your topic.

Many students underestimate the power of a well-chosen topic. They dive into the first idea that comes to mind, only to discover months later that their topic is too broad, too narrow, or lacks the academic sources required for a substantive essay. Others choose topics that seem impressive on the surface but fail to generate the personal passion needed to sustain 40+ hours of research and writing.

At Eclassopedia, we have guided hundreds of IB students through their Extended Essay journeys. In this 2026 edition of our flagship guide, we walk you through every step of the topic selection process — from understanding what makes a topic 'good' in the IB's eyes, to refining your research question, to navigating subject-specific requirements. Whether you are just

beginning your EE process or revisiting your initial topic choice, this guide will give you the clarity and confidence to move forward.

What is the Extended Essay?

The Extended Essay is a 4,000-word independent research paper submitted as part of the IB Diploma Programme. It is graded from A to E (with A being highest), and a good grade can contribute up to 3 bonus points to your overall IB score when combined with your Theory of Knowledge grade. More importantly, it develops skills essential for university-level study: independent research, academic writing, and critical analysis.

Step 1: Understand What Makes a 'Good' EE Topic

Before you start brainstorming, it is essential to understand the criteria by which the IB assesses EE topics — and, by extension, the finished essays. The IB does not want a topic that is simply interesting; it wants a topic that is academically rigorous, clearly focused, and genuinely researchable within the constraints of the EE format.

The Five Hallmarks of a Strong EE Topic

1. Focused and Specific

One of the most common mistakes students make is choosing a topic that is far too broad. 'Climate change and its effects' is not an EE topic — it is an entire academic field. A strong EE topic narrows the scope to something that can be meaningfully explored in 4,000 words. For example, 'The effectiveness of carbon taxation in reducing industrial emissions in Sweden between 2010 and 2020' gives the reader immediate clarity about what the essay will cover.

2. Linked to a Specific IB Subject

Every EE must be registered under one of the IB's approved subjects. This means your topic must be framed through the lens of that subject's methodology and body of knowledge. A topic about the psychology of social media addiction belongs under Psychology, not Sociology or Media Studies. Choosing the right subject is not merely administrative — it shapes how you approach your research, the sources you use, and the analytical framework you apply.

3. Researchable

A topic is only as good as the sources available to support it. Before finalising your topic, ask yourself: Can I find peer-reviewed academic articles, books, or credible data on this subject? If your topic relies on primary sources (interviews, surveys, experiments), are those accessible to you? A topic about a cutting-edge technology released in 2025 may sound exciting but could have little published academic research available yet.

4. Leads to a Genuine Research Question

The IB assesses your essay based on your ability to answer a focused research question. Your topic must naturally generate a question that is neither too obvious nor unanswerable. A research question should invite analysis, not merely description. 'What is the history of jazz music?' is descriptive. 'To what extent did economic factors drive the commercialisation of jazz in 1920s New York?' invites critical analysis.

5. Personally Meaningful

The IB explicitly values 'intellectual initiative' and the 'personal engagement' of the student. You will spend a minimum of 40 hours on your EE. If you choose a topic you find tedious, that will be reflected in the quality of your work. Choose something that genuinely excites your intellectual curiosity — something you would happily read about even without the grade incentive.

Eclassopedia Tip

Before settling on your topic, ask yourself: 'Would I be happy spending an entire Saturday reading academic articles about this?' If the answer is no, keep looking. The EE is a marathon, not a sprint, and genuine interest is the fuel that keeps students going through the difficult middle stages.

Step 2: Choose Your Subject Area Wisely

The subject you register your EE under is a critical choice — and one that many students make too hastily. Your subject determines the methodological approach required, the types of sources that will be valued, and the criteria examiners will use to assess your work. Let us walk through the key considerations.

Should You Choose Your Strongest Subject?

Not necessarily. Your strongest subject is a good starting point because you likely have deeper foundational knowledge there. However, the EE sometimes allows students to explore a subject they find intellectually thrilling, even if it is not their strongest HL course. For instance, a student whose passion is philosophy may produce a more compelling EE in Philosophy than in Biology, even if Biology is where they score higher on exams.

That said, choosing a subject you genuinely struggle with can create unnecessary pressure. If you register your EE under History but consistently find historical source analysis challenging, you may compound the difficulty of an already demanding task. Aim for the intersection of passion and competence.

Subject-Specific EE Expectations: An Overview

Criterion	What the IB Wants to See
Sciences (Biology, Chemistry, Physics)	Experimental or data-driven; must include primary data collection in many cases; strong emphasis on scientific methodology and analysis
History	Requires engagement with primary and secondary historical sources; must demonstrate historiographical awareness; analytical framing is essential
Economics	Should apply economic theory and models to a real-world context; both primary and secondary research are acceptable; clear economic analysis required
English Literature	Close reading and literary analysis of a text or texts; must engage with scholarly criticism; personal interpretation guided by evidence from the text
Mathematics	Exploration of a mathematical concept or proof; requires original mathematical reasoning rather than just repeating known results
Psychology	Engagement with psychological theories and empirical research; students may conduct primary research with ethical approval; use of IB psychological terminology expected
Philosophy	Conceptual analysis and argument; engagement with philosophical texts; must demonstrate the ability to construct and critique philosophical reasoning

World Studies	Interdisciplinary essay examining a global issue through two IB subjects; requires explicit integration of both disciplines throughout

World Studies EE

The World Studies Extended Essay is a unique option that allows students to explore a globally significant issue through the lens of two different IB subjects — for example, Economics and Environmental Systems & Societies. If you have strong interdisciplinary interests, this can be a highly rewarding path. However, be aware that it requires demonstrating genuine integration of both disciplines, not simply treating them as parallel threads.

Step 3: Generate and Brainstorm Topic Ideas

With your subject selected, it is time to brainstorm potential topics. This is a stage where many students either rush ahead or become paralysed by the number of possibilities. The key is a structured approach that generates multiple options before narrowing down.

Brainstorming Strategies That Work

Strategy 1: Start with What You Already Know

Look back at your IB coursework. What topics in your classes have sparked genuine curiosity? Was there a case study in Economics that you wished you had more time to explore? A scientific concept in Biology that raised questions your textbook did not answer? Your IB classes are a natural treasure trove of potential EE directions.

Strategy 2: Follow Real-World Interests

Think about issues in the world that you care about — social justice, climate change, artificial intelligence, mental health, cultural identity. Then ask: How can I frame this interest through the lens of my chosen subject? A student interested in mental health might write a Psychology EE on cognitive behavioural therapy, or an Economics EE on the economic costs of untreated depression in developing countries.

Strategy 3: Read Academic Abstracts

Spend an hour on Google Scholar, JSTOR, or your school library's online database searching for recent academic articles in your subject area. You do not need to read full articles — just the abstracts. This exposes you to the kinds of questions academics are asking in that field, and often sparks ideas you would never have arrived at on your own.

Strategy 4: Talk to Your Supervisor

Your EE supervisor is a teacher in your chosen subject. They have seen many EEs over the years and have a clear sense of what works and what does not. Schedule an early meeting and come with three to five rough ideas. Their feedback will save you enormous time and effort later in the process.

Strategy 5: Look at Previous EEs

The IB publishes sample EEs with examiner comments on its resources portal. Your school library may also have copies of past EEs submitted by former students. Reading these — especially the high-scoring ones — gives you a concrete sense of what a successful EE topic looks like in your subject.

> **Eclassopedia Tip**
> Aim to generate at least 10 rough topic ideas before you start narrowing down. The first idea you think of is rarely your best one. The brainstorming phase should feel generative and open — save the critical evaluation for later.

Step 4: Evaluate Your Topic Ideas Against the IB Criteria

Once you have a list of potential topics, it is time to evaluate them systematically. This is where many students go wrong — they fall in love with one idea and stop evaluating objectively. Treat this stage like a job interview for your ideas: each one must prove it deserves the position.

The Eclassopedia Topic Evaluation Checklist

For each topic idea, run through the following questions:

1. **Is the topic clearly linked to a specific IB subject?**

2. Can the topic be narrowed to something addressable in 4,000 words?
3. Does the topic lead to a genuine research question (not just a descriptive summary)?
4. Are there sufficient academic sources available on this topic?
5. Is the topic appropriate for school-level research (not requiring specialised equipment or unethical data collection)?
6. Does the topic genuinely interest me, not just sound impressive?
7. Would my supervisor be able to provide meaningful guidance on this topic?

A strong topic should answer 'yes' to all or nearly all of these questions. If a topic fails on multiple fronts, set it aside rather than forcing it to work.

Common Topic Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Topics that are too broad:** "The impact of globalisation" covers an entire academic discipline. Narrow it to a specific country, time period, industry, or phenomenon.
- **Topics that are too narrow:** "The sales figures of Company X in Q3 2024" lacks the academic depth required. There must be enough material to analyse meaningfully.
- **Topics that are purely descriptive:** The IB wants analysis, not description. A topic that leads only to 'What happened?' rather than 'Why?' or 'To what extent?' will score poorly.
- **Topics without academic sources:** Topics based solely on websites, news articles, or personal opinions cannot meet the academic rigour expected of an EE.
- **Topics that rely on inaccessible data:** If your topic requires primary research (surveys, interviews, experiments) and you cannot practically conduct that research, your topic will be unworkable.

Step 5: Craft a Focused and Effective Research Question

The research question is the single most important sentence of your entire Extended Essay. It frames everything — the scope of your research, the structure of your argument, and the criteria by which examiners will assess your success. A poorly framed research question can doom an otherwise interesting topic. A brilliantly framed research question elevates even a modest topic.

Characteristics of a Strong Research Question

- **Specific:** It identifies the exact focus of the essay — particular time period, place, text, theory, or phenomenon.
- **Analytical:** It invites evaluation or argument, not merely description. Words like 'to what extent,' 'how effectively,' 'in what ways,' and 'why' signal analytical intent.
- **Answerable:** It can be addressed with available evidence within 4,000 words. Avoid questions so broad or complex that they would require a doctoral thesis to answer.
- **Subject-appropriate:** It reflects the methodology and concerns of the chosen IB subject. A Biology EE question should sound like something a biologist would investigate.

Research Question Examples: Weak vs. Strong

Weak Research Question	Strong Research Question
What is climate change?	*To what extent has Norway's carbon tax policy reduced per capita CO2 emissions from the transport sector between 2010 and 2022?*
How does social media affect mental health?	*In what ways does Instagram use correlate with depressive symptoms in female adolescents aged 13-17, according to longitudinal studies conducted between 2015 and 2023?*
Did Hitler cause World War II?	*How did the failure of collective security mechanisms in the 1930s contribute to the outbreak of World War II, with reference to the Abyssinia Crisis and the Anschluss?*

The Research Question Refinement Process

Crafting a research question is rarely a one-step process. Expect to draft and refine your question multiple times. Here is the recommended process:

1. Write a rough topic statement (not a question): e.g., 'I want to study the effect of minimum wage increases on youth unemployment in the UK.'
2. Convert it into a broad question: e.g., 'How does the minimum wage affect youth unemployment in the UK?'
3. Identify missing specificity: Which time period? Which age group? What data will you use? What economic framework will you apply?
4. Refine with specifics: e.g., 'To what extent did the 2016 National Living Wage increase contribute to youth unemployment (aged 16-24) in the United Kingdom, using Labour Market Statistics?'
5. Check against criteria: Is it analytical? Specific? Answerable? Subject-appropriate?

6. Consult your supervisor and revise again if necessary.

Step 6: Conduct a Preliminary Source Search

Before finalising your topic and research question, it is essential to conduct a preliminary source search. This step acts as a reality check — it tells you whether sufficient academic literature exists to support a 4,000-word essay on your chosen topic.

Where to Search for Sources

- **Google Scholar (scholar.google.com):** The go-to starting point for academic articles across all subjects. Use specific keywords related to your topic.
- **JSTOR (jstor.org):** A vast digital library of academic journals, books, and primary sources. Particularly strong in humanities, social sciences, and arts.
- **PubMed (pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov):** The gold standard for life sciences and biomedical research. Essential for Biology, Chemistry, and Psychology EEs with health-related topics.
- **Your School Library Database:** Many schools subscribe to academic databases such as Britannica Academic, Gale, or ProQuest. Ask your librarian what is available.
- **World Bank & IMF Data Portals:** For Economics EEs requiring statistical data, these portals offer free, peer-reviewed economic data sets that can form the empirical backbone of your analysis.

What You Are Looking For

During your preliminary search, you are not reading sources in depth — you are simply checking availability. Aim to find:

- At least 8-10 credible academic sources (peer-reviewed articles, academic books, official data sets)
- Sources that are directly relevant to your specific research question (not just the general topic area)
- Sources from the last 15-20 years, unless you are writing a historical essay where older sources are appropriate
- Multiple perspectives or competing interpretations (this is especially important for essays in History, Economics, and the social sciences)

Red Flag: Too Few Sources

If you search thoroughly and can find fewer than five credible, directly relevant academic sources on your topic, that is a clear signal to reconsider. A topic without sufficient academic literature will force you to rely on unreliable sources or, worse, pad your essay with superficial content — both of which will damage your grade.

Step 7: Assess Feasibility — Practical and Ethical Considerations

An often-overlooked dimension of topic selection is practical feasibility. Even if your topic is academically ideal, it must be achievable given your circumstances, resources, and the IB's ethical guidelines. Examiners have seen many EEs derailed not by poor thinking but by poor planning.

Practical Feasibility

Time Constraints

Your EE will unfold over many months, typically alongside your full IB workload. Factor in how much time you can realistically dedicate to your topic. Science EEs with complex experimental designs, or history EEs requiring access to archives in foreign countries, may be technically excellent but practically unachievable.

Equipment and Materials

Science EEs, particularly in Biology, Chemistry, and Physics, often require specific equipment or chemicals. Before choosing an experimental topic, verify with your school's science department that the required materials are available and permitted.

Language of Sources

If your ideal topic is primarily documented in academic literature published in a language you do not speak fluently, you will face significant challenges. While translation is possible, it adds risk and complexity. Aim for topics where the majority of your sources are available in a language you read comfortably.

Ethical Considerations

The IB takes research ethics extremely seriously, particularly in the sciences and social sciences. If your EE involves primary research with human participants, you must obtain ethical approval through your school and ensure your methodology complies with the IB's ethical guidelines. Key ethical principles include:

- **Informed consent:** All participants must voluntarily agree to take part and understand what their participation involves.
- **Anonymity and confidentiality:** Participants' identities must be protected unless they have explicitly consented to being identified.
- **No harm:** Research must not place participants — physical, psychological, or social — at risk of harm.
- **Right to withdraw:** Participants must be free to withdraw from the research at any stage without penalty.

Topics involving minors, vulnerable populations, or sensitive subjects (mental health, trauma, addiction) require particular care and must be discussed with your supervisor and school ethics coordinator well in advance.

Step 8: Get Supervisor Feedback and Finalise Your Topic

The supervisor consultation is not merely a formality — it is one of the most valuable resources you have. The IB mandates that each student has a supervisor with whom they meet for at least three formal reflection sessions. However, experienced IB students know that the most important conversation happens early: the initial topic discussion.

Making the Most of Your First Supervisor Meeting

Come to your first supervisor meeting prepared. Do not walk in with a vague idea and hope your supervisor will shape it for you. Arrive with:

1. Two to three specific topic ideas (not just one — this shows you have thought broadly)
2. A draft research question for your preferred topic
3. A list of five to ten sources you have already found
4. A brief explanation of why you are interested in the topic

5. Any concerns or practical limitations you have already identified

Your supervisor will help you identify whether your topic is appropriately scoped for the IB EE format, flag any subject-specific requirements you may have missed, and advise on whether your research question is analytical enough to achieve high marks.

When Your Supervisor Suggests Changes

Sometimes a supervisor will suggest significant changes to your topic or research question. This can feel discouraging, but treat it as valuable guidance from someone who has seen many EEs succeed and fail. If your supervisor suggests that your topic is too broad, too narrow, or not well-suited to the subject you have chosen, take that feedback seriously. It is far better to adjust your topic at the planning stage than to discover these problems halfway through writing.

Eclassopedia Tip

Remember that your supervisor's role is to guide, not to direct. They cannot choose your topic for you or write your essay. Their guidance is most valuable when you come prepared with specific questions rather than broad requests for direction. The students who get the most out of their supervisors are those who are proactive, organised, and willing to engage critically with the feedback they receive.

Step 9: Subject-Specific Topic Guidance

While the steps outlined above apply broadly across all EE subjects, each subject has specific conventions and expectations that should shape how you approach your topic choice. Below, we provide focused guidance for the most popular EE subjects.

Biology

Biology EEs are expected to include a practical component — that is, primary data collected through an experiment or systematic observation. A good Biology EE topic is one that can be investigated experimentally within the resources available at your school. Topics should be framed around a measurable variable and a clear hypothesis. Avoid topics that are purely review-based; the IB expects Biology students to engage with original data.

Strong Biology EE topics often involve investigating the effect of one variable (independent) on a measurable biological outcome (dependent) — for example, the effect of pH levels on enzyme activity, or the impact of varying light wavelengths on the rate of photosynthesis in a specific plant species.

History

History EEs must demonstrate historiographical awareness — that is, an understanding of how different historians have interpreted the same events differently. Your research question should be framed so that it can be answered through the analysis and evaluation of both primary and secondary historical sources. Avoid topics from the last ten years, as there is rarely sufficient scholarly literature on very recent events.

Strong History EEs often focus on causation, significance, or comparative analysis. Narrow your topic geographically and temporally. Instead of 'The causes of the First World War,' consider 'How significant was the role of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the escalation of the July Crisis of 1914?'

Economics

Economics EEs should apply economic theory and models to real-world situations. The best Economics EEs combine economic analysis with data — whether statistical data from official sources or qualitative data from surveys and interviews. Avoid topics that are purely theoretical; the IB wants to see theory applied to evidence.

Strong Economics EEs often examine the economic impact of a specific policy, event, or market phenomenon in a clearly defined context. Microeconomic and macroeconomic topics are both valid, but your framing should be explicit and your chosen economic models clearly identified.

English Literature

English Literature EEs require close reading and literary analysis. You must work with texts that are written in English (unless you are writing a World Literature EE comparing texts in translation). Your research question should be literary in nature — focusing on themes, narrative technique, characterisation, symbolism, or the cultural and historical context of the text.

Avoid plot summary at all costs. The IB wants textual analysis, not retelling. Strong Literature EEs use secondary critical sources to contextualise or challenge their interpretations, but the primary evidence must always come from the literary text itself.

Psychology

Psychology EEs should engage with psychological theories, studies, and concepts covered within the IB Psychology curriculum (though going beyond the syllabus is encouraged). If you conduct primary research (surveys, experiments), you must obtain ethical approval and ensure your methodology is rigorous. Secondary research essays are equally valid if they demonstrate genuine critical engagement with the psychological literature.

Strong Psychology EEs often examine the applicability of a theory to a specific context, the consistency of findings across different studies, or the cultural or ethical limitations of a particular psychological research area.

Step 10: Create a Preliminary Essay Outline

Once your topic and research question are finalised, creating a preliminary essay outline is the final step in the topic selection phase. This outline serves two purposes: it confirms that your topic is genuinely workable, and it gives you a roadmap for the research and writing phases ahead.

What a Good EE Outline Looks Like

A preliminary EE outline should not be a rigid script — it is a flexible framework. A typical 4,000-word EE outline might look like this:

1. Introduction (approximately 300-400 words): Introduce the topic, provide context, state the research question, and outline the structure of the essay.
2. Background / Theoretical Framework (approximately 400-600 words): Provide the academic context and key theories or concepts that underpin your analysis.
3. Main Body — Section 1 (approximately 700-900 words): Address the first major aspect of your research question with evidence and analysis.
4. Main Body — Section 2 (approximately 700-900 words): Address the second major aspect or a contrasting perspective, again with evidence and analysis.

5. Main Body — Section 3 (approximately 500-700 words): Synthesise your findings, address counterarguments, and build toward your conclusion.
6. Conclusion (approximately 300-400 words): Directly answer the research question, reflect on the limitations of your study, and suggest directions for further research.

If you cannot populate this outline — if you genuinely cannot identify what will go in each section — that is a sign that your topic may still need further narrowing or that you need to do more preliminary reading before proceeding.

Eclassopedia Tip

Show your preliminary outline to your supervisor at your second formal meeting. They can help identify structural gaps, flag sections where your argument may be underdeveloped, and ensure that your essay plan aligns with the subject-specific expectations of your chosen discipline.

Conclusion: The Best Topic Is One You Can Pursue with Rigour and Passion

Choosing a good EE topic is not about finding the most impressive-sounding subject or replicating what a successful student did the year before. It is about finding the intersection of your intellectual passion, your academic strengths, and the rigorous standards the IB demands. A topic that genuinely excites you, framed with precision and supported by credible sources, is your surest path to a strong grade and — more importantly — a genuinely rewarding academic experience.

At Eclassopedia, we believe that the EE is one of the most valuable experiences the IB offers. It is your opportunity to conduct real independent research on a topic that matters to you, to develop skills that will serve you for the rest of your academic life, and to demonstrate to universities around the world that you are capable of sustained, rigorous intellectual work. Take the topic selection process seriously — the care you invest at this stage will pay dividends throughout every phase of your EE journey.

We hope this guide has given you the clarity and confidence to choose your EE topic wisely. If you need additional support — whether through one-to-one tutoring, essay review sessions, or subject-specific guidance — Eclassopedia is here to help. Our experienced IB tutors have guided students through the full EE process, from initial topic brainstorming to final submission, and we are committed to helping every student reach their academic potential.

About Eclassopedia

Eclassopedia is a leading online IB learning platform dedicated to supporting IB students worldwide. Our team of qualified IB tutors offers personalised guidance across all IB subjects, including specialised Extended Essay coaching, Theory of Knowledge support, and Internal Assessment preparation. Visit us at www.eclassopedia.com to learn more about our 2026 programmes.

Quick Reference: 10-Step EE Topic Selection Summary

1. Understand what makes a 'good' EE topic: focused, analytical, researchable, subject-linked, and personally meaningful.
2. Choose your subject wisely — find the intersection of passion and academic competence.
3. Brainstorm at least 10 topic ideas before evaluating any of them.
4. Evaluate each topic against the IB criteria using the Eclassopedia checklist.
5. Craft a focused, analytical research question through a systematic refinement process.
6. Conduct a preliminary source search to confirm the availability of academic literature.
7. Assess the practical and ethical feasibility of your topic.
8. Get supervisor feedback and use it to refine your topic and research question.
9. Apply subject-specific knowledge to ensure your topic meets the particular expectations of your chosen discipline.
10. Create a preliminary essay outline to confirm your topic is workable and to guide your research and writing.

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