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HOW TO START YOUR

EXTENDED ESSAY

From Zero to Submission — A Complete 2026 IB Guide

2026 Edition | eclassopedia.com

Introduction: Why the Extended Essay Matters

The International Baccalaureate Extended Essay (EE) is one of the most significant academic undertakings in a student's pre-university journey. Spanning up to 4,000 words of polished, independently researched academic writing, it demands not only intellectual effort but also self-discipline, planning, and clarity of thought. For many students, this is the first time they will engage in genuine scholarly inquiry — and for that reason alone, it is an experience that shapes future academic success.

Yet every year, students across the globe open a blank document and freeze. The cursor blinks. The task feels overwhelming. Where do you even begin?

At Eclassopedia, we have guided hundreds of IB students through the Extended Essay process. We have seen students transform vague curiosity into compelling research questions, and rough outlines into award-worthy essays. This guide — our most comprehensive 2026 edition — is designed to take you from that first blank page all the way to a complete, well-structured Extended Essay. Whether you are at the very start of your IB journey or already in the middle of your research, this guide will give you a clear path forward.



**KEY
FACT**

The Extended Essay is worth up to 3 bonus points on your IB Diploma when combined with your Theory of Knowledge grade. A strong EE can be the difference between receiving your Diploma and not.

Section 1: Understanding the Extended Essay

1.1 What Is the Extended Essay?

The Extended Essay is a 4,000-word independent research paper written over the course of approximately 18 months. It is a core component of the IB Diploma Programme and must be completed by all Diploma students. The essay must be grounded in one of the IB subject areas — from Group 1 languages to Group 6 arts — and must demonstrate a genuine research process, including the formulation of a focused research question, collection and analysis of evidence, and the construction of a reasoned argument.

The EE is assessed against five official criteria: Focus and Method, Knowledge and Understanding, Critical Thinking, Presentation, and Engagement. Each criterion has specific descriptors that examiners use to award marks, and understanding these descriptors from the very beginning is essential to producing a high-scoring essay.

1.2 The 2026 Assessment Framework

For the 2026 examination session, the IB has maintained the core structure introduced in its 2018 reforms, with continued emphasis on the Reflections on Planning and Progress Form (RPPF). Here is a quick overview of the key components:

- Research question: A specific, researchable question that guides the entire essay
- Word limit: 4,000 words maximum (excluding abstract, contents page, references, and bibliography)
- Supervisor: A subject-specialist teacher who provides up to three formal reflection sessions
- RPPF: A compulsory reflective document submitted alongside the essay
- Viva voce: A short concluding reflection conversation with your supervisor



The abstract has been replaced in the 2013 reforms. Do not include a traditional abstract. Instead, focus your opening on clearly situating your research question within its academic context.

1.3 Choosing Your Subject

One of the most consequential decisions you will make is choosing which IB subject to write your Extended Essay in. This choice determines the type of research you will conduct, the sources you will draw upon, and the academic conventions you must follow. Here are the key considerations:

- Genuine interest: You will spend over a year with this topic. Choose something that genuinely fascinates you.
- Supervisor availability: Your school must have a supervisor qualified in the subject you choose.
- Source availability: Can you access the primary and secondary sources the essay will require?
- Research feasibility: Is the topic researchable within the IB's ethical and practical guidelines?

The most common EE subjects are Biology, History, Economics, English Literature, and Psychology. However, students who choose a subject they are passionate about — even if it is less

commonly chosen — often produce the most compelling essays. Eclassopedia has seen exceptional EEs in subjects ranging from Music to Environmental Systems, and from Global Politics to Visual Arts.

Section 2: Finding and Refining Your Topic

2.1 From Curiosity to Research Area

Every great Extended Essay begins not with a research question but with a feeling — a sense of curiosity about something in the world. Perhaps you read a news article that challenged your assumptions. Perhaps you noticed a contradiction in your textbook that your teacher could not fully explain. Perhaps a personal experience sparked a question that you have never been able to shake.

Your first task is to identify and articulate that curiosity. Start by asking yourself:

1. What topics in my IB subjects have I found most engaging or surprising?
2. What questions do I find myself returning to, even outside of class?
3. Is there a real-world issue that I care about deeply and would like to investigate academically?
4. What books, articles, or documentaries have I consumed beyond the IB curriculum?

Once you have identified a broad area of interest, the next challenge is to move from that broad area to a specific, manageable research topic. This process — narrowing your focus — is one of the most intellectually demanding aspects of the EE, and it is also one of the most rewarding.

2.2 Narrowing Your Focus

A research topic that is too broad will result in a superficial essay that skims the surface of a vast subject. A topic that is too narrow may not generate enough material for 4,000 words of substantive analysis. Finding the right level of specificity is a skill, and it takes practice.

Consider the following progression as a model:

BROAD

Climate change and its effects on agriculture

NARROWER

The impact of rising temperatures on wheat yields in South Asia

**FOCUS
D**

How have changing monsoon patterns between 2010 and 2023 affected wheat production in the Punjab region of India?

Notice how each step makes the topic more specific, more geographically or temporally bounded, and more analytically focused. The final version is researchable: it has a time frame, a location, a specific variable (monsoon patterns), and a clear subject of inquiry (wheat production).

2.3 Crafting Your Research Question

The research question is the spine of your Extended Essay. Every sentence you write, every source you cite, every argument you make should connect back to this central question. A strong research question has the following characteristics:

- Focused: It addresses one clear, specific issue rather than multiple overlapping ones.
- Arguable: It cannot be answered with a simple yes or no, or with a single factual statement.
- Researchable: It can be investigated using available primary and secondary sources.
- Appropriately scoped: It can be meaningfully addressed within 4,000 words.
- Academically framed: It uses the language and conventions of its subject discipline.

Common Research Question Mistakes to Avoid

Even experienced IB students often make predictable errors when formulating their research questions. Here are the most common pitfalls, along with corrected versions:

**X TOO
BROAD**

What is the relationship between social media and mental health?

**✓
IMPROV
ED**

To what extent does passive Instagram use correlate with depression symptoms in female adolescents aged 15-17, based on studies published between 2018 and 2024?

**X
YES/NO**

Did the Treaty of Versailles cause World War II?

**✓
IMPROV
ED**

To what extent did the economic provisions of the Treaty of Versailles contribute to the rise of National Socialism in Germany between 1919 and 1933?

At Eclassopedia, we recommend drafting at least three to five versions of your research question before settling on a final version. Share each version with your supervisor and ask them to evaluate the focus, scope, and subject-specific relevance of each.

Section 3: Planning Your Research

3.1 Building a Research Strategy

Once you have a focused research question, you need a plan for answering it. This means identifying what types of evidence will be most relevant, where you will find that evidence, and how you will evaluate its quality and relevance. Research planning is not a one-time activity — it is an ongoing process that evolves as your understanding of the topic deepens.

A useful starting point is to divide your potential sources into three categories:

- **Primary sources:** Original data, texts, artworks, interviews, or other firsthand material directly related to your topic.
- **Secondary sources:** Scholarly analyses, commentaries, textbooks, and peer-reviewed articles that interpret or discuss primary material.
- **Tertiary sources:** Encyclopedias, databases, and other reference works useful for orientation but not typically cited in the final essay.

3.2 Where to Find Quality Sources

The quality of your research will ultimately be determined by the quality of your sources. IB examiners are trained to distinguish between superficial research that relies on Wikipedia and popular websites, and genuine academic inquiry supported by credible, specialist sources.

For most EE subjects, the following source types are appropriate:

- **Peer-reviewed journal articles:** Accessible through Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, and your school library.
- **Academic textbooks:** Essential for establishing foundational knowledge and theoretical frameworks.
- **Government and institutional reports:** Highly credible for data-driven essays in Economics, Environmental Systems, and Global Politics.
- **Published interviews and speeches:** Valuable primary sources for History, Literature, and Language EEs.
- **Experimental data:** For Science EEs, your own laboratory experiments can serve as primary data.



Many universities offer free database access to secondary school students. Ask your school librarian about JSTOR, ProQuest, or EBSCOhost subscriptions. These

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TIP**

platforms give you access to thousands of peer-reviewed articles that are far superior to general internet searches.

3.3 Evaluating Your Sources

Not all sources are created equal. As part of your research process, you must critically evaluate every source you intend to use. The SIFT method is a useful framework for this evaluation:

- Stop: Pause before sharing or citing a source. Verify its credibility.
- Investigate the source: Who wrote it? What are their credentials? What institution do they represent?
- Find better coverage: Can you verify the claim or data point using multiple independent sources?
- Trace claims: Where does the original data or argument come from?

3.4 Creating a Research Timeline

The Extended Essay spans approximately 18 months, but this time disappears remarkably quickly. Without a structured timeline, it is easy to fall behind, miss supervisor meetings, or find yourself scrambling in the final weeks before submission. Eclassopedia recommends the following general timeline for 2026 EE students:

Timeline	Key Tasks
Months 1–2	Choose subject, identify broad topic area, meet supervisor, begin exploratory reading
Months 3–4	Draft and finalise research question, conduct background research, plan essay structure
Months 5–7	Deep research phase: read primary and secondary sources, take detailed notes, begin annotation
Months 8–10	Write first full draft, submit to supervisor, receive feedback
Months 11–13	Revise draft, refine argument, check against assessment criteria
Months 14–16	Write second full draft, conduct final research to fill any gaps
Months 17–18	Final editing, proofreading, formatting, submit to supervisor for final review, submit essay

Section 4: Structuring Your Extended Essay

4.1 The Architecture of a Strong EE

A well-structured Extended Essay guides the reader through your argument with clarity and purpose. Every section should have a clear function, and every paragraph should move the argument forward. While the specific structure will vary depending on your subject, most Extended Essays follow a recognisable pattern:

5. Introduction: Establishing the research question, its context, and its significance
6. Background/Context: Providing the theoretical and factual foundation for your analysis
7. Body/Analysis: Presenting evidence, engaging with sources, and developing your argument
8. Discussion/Evaluation: Weighing competing interpretations, acknowledging limitations, and synthesising findings
9. Conclusion: Answering your research question, summarising key findings, and reflecting on broader implications
10. References/Bibliography: Citing all sources in the appropriate format

4.2 Writing a Powerful Introduction

Your introduction must accomplish several things within a limited word count. It should establish the topic and its academic relevance, introduce the research question clearly, outline the scope and structure of the essay, and give the reader a sense of why this question matters. A strong introduction is specific, scholarly, and purposeful — it does not waste words on vague generalities or excessive background.

A common formula for EE introductions that works well across subjects:

- Open with a specific observation, data point, or quotation that contextualises the topic.
- Identify the academic gap or tension that your research question will address.
- State your research question explicitly and unambiguously.
- Briefly outline the methodology or approach you will take to answer it.
- Indicate the scope of the essay — what will and will not be covered, and why.



Do not begin your introduction with a dictionary definition, a sweeping historical claim ('Since the dawn of time...'), or a series of rhetorical questions. These openings are clichéd and waste valuable words.

4.3 Building Your Argument in the Body

The body of your essay is where the real academic work happens. Each section of the body should address a discrete aspect of your research question, presenting evidence and analysis in a logical, cumulative sequence. Think of the body as a series of interconnected arguments that build toward your overall conclusion.

Key principles for structuring your body paragraphs:

- Each paragraph should begin with a clear topic sentence that signals its focus.
- Evidence should be presented before it is analysed — never cite a source without explaining its significance.
- Counterarguments should be engaged with honestly and refuted with evidence, not dismissed.
- Transitions between sections should be explicit and logical, guiding the reader through your argument.

Eclassopedia recommends using the PEEL structure (Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link) as a foundational framework for body paragraphs, particularly for students writing their first full draft. As your writing matures, you can move beyond this structure while retaining its core logic.

4.4 Concluding with Authority

Many students underestimate the importance of the conclusion. A weak conclusion that merely summarises what has already been said will leave the examiner dissatisfied. A powerful conclusion does three things: it answers the research question directly and with conviction, it reflects on the significance and limitations of the investigation, and it opens the door to further inquiry by identifying what your research has not been able to address.

Your conclusion should feel earned — it should be the logical culmination of the argument you have built throughout the essay, not a sudden leap to a new idea. If your conclusion surprises you when you write it, that is a sign that your argument may need revision.

Section 5: Subject-Specific Guidance

5.1 Extended Essays in the Sciences

Science EEs — in Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Computer Science, and Environmental Systems — typically involve a combination of primary experimental data and secondary literature review. The research question must be empirically investigable, and the methodology must be clearly articulated and replicable.

Key considerations for Science EEs:

- Design a feasible experiment that can be conducted within your school's facilities.
- Collect sufficient data to support statistical analysis — use appropriate sample sizes.
- Apply relevant mathematical or statistical tools (e.g., t-tests, chi-square tests, regression analysis).
- Discuss sources of error and uncertainty honestly and specifically.
- Connect your findings to broader scientific theory and literature.

5.2 Extended Essays in the Humanities

History, Economics, Global Politics, and Philosophy EEs require a different kind of rigour — one grounded in the careful analysis of texts, data, and competing scholarly interpretations. The argument must be nuanced and must engage critically with the available evidence.

For History EEs, the OPCVL method (Origin, Purpose, Content, Value, Limitation) is useful for evaluating primary and secondary sources. For Economics EEs, the use of economic models, real-world data, and theoretical frameworks should be balanced and explicitly connected to the research question.

5.3 Extended Essays in Language and Literature

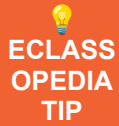
English A: Language and Literature, World Literature, and Language B EEs focus on the close analysis of texts, literary techniques, and linguistic features. These essays demand sophisticated literary analysis, an awareness of cultural and historical context, and precise, analytical prose.

Common approaches include comparative analyses of two texts, close readings of a single author's work, or investigations into the relationship between a text and its socio-historical context. The

research question must be literary or linguistic in nature — plot summary and personal opinion are not sufficient.

5.4 Extended Essays in the Arts

Visual Arts, Music, Theatre, Film, and Dance EEs allow for creative and analytical engagement with art forms. Students in these subjects often combine personal creative practice with academic analysis, exploring questions about aesthetics, cultural meaning, or artistic technique.



Arts EEs that successfully balance personal creative engagement with rigorous academic analysis tend to score the highest marks. Avoid writing a purely descriptive account of an artwork or artist — the emphasis must always be on analysis and argument.

Section 6: Working with Your Supervisor

6.1 The Supervisor Relationship

Your EE supervisor is one of the most valuable resources available to you. They are a subject specialist who can help you refine your research question, evaluate your sources, and provide feedback on your drafts. However, the supervisor's role is not to write your essay for you — they are a guide, not a ghostwriter.

To make the most of your supervisor relationship:

- Come to every meeting with specific questions and prepared materials.
- Take detailed notes during meetings and follow up with a written summary of what was discussed.
- Act on feedback promptly — do not wait until the next meeting to implement suggestions.
- Be honest about your progress, even when it is slower than expected.

6.2 The RPPF: Your Reflection Journey

The Reflections on Planning and Progress Form (RPPF) is a compulsory component of the Extended Essay that is submitted alongside your essay. It consists of three reflections — one after each of your three formal supervisor meetings — and must be completed in your own words.

The RPPF is assessed as part of Criterion E (Engagement) and accounts for up to 6 marks. IB examiners use the RPPF to assess the depth of your intellectual engagement with the research process, your ability to reflect critically on challenges and decisions, and your personal growth as a researcher.

Strong RPPF reflections are honest, specific, and intellectually substantive. They do not simply recount what you did — they reflect on why you made certain decisions, what you found challenging, and how your thinking has evolved. Eclassopedia recommends writing your RPPF reflections immediately after each supervisor meeting, while the conversation is still fresh in your mind.

Section 7: Writing, Revising, and Polishing

7.1 Getting Your First Draft Down

The most important thing about your first draft is that it exists. Many students spend so long planning and researching that they never actually start writing — or they start writing only to delete everything because it is not good enough. Your first draft does not need to be good. It needs to be done.

Set a specific writing target for each session — aim for 300 to 500 words per sitting — and write without editing as you go. The revision process will take care of the quality later. Focus on getting your ideas onto the page in a logical order, and trust that the argument will sharpen through revision.

7.2 The Revision Process

Revision is where good essays become great essays. Once you have a complete first draft, step away from it for at least 48 hours before returning to revise. You will read it with fresh eyes and notice problems that were invisible when you were in the middle of writing.

Eclassopedia recommends a four-stage revision process:

11. Structural revision: Does the essay answer the research question? Is the argument logical and progressive? Are there any sections that digress or repeat?
12. Content revision: Is all the evidence relevant and accurately cited? Are there any gaps in the argument that need to be filled? Have you engaged with counterarguments?
13. Language revision: Is the writing precise, academic, and clear? Are there any sentences that are ambiguous or overly long? Is the vocabulary appropriate for the subject?
14. Mechanical revision: Are the citations correct? Is the formatting consistent? Have you respected the word count?

7.3 Academic Integrity and Citation

Academic integrity is non-negotiable in the Extended Essay. Every idea, piece of data, or argument that originates from another source must be properly attributed. Plagiarism — whether intentional or accidental — can result in the cancellation of your IB Diploma. This is not a risk worth taking.

The IB accepts several citation formats, including MLA, APA, Chicago, and Vancouver. Choose the format that is standard in your subject discipline and apply it consistently throughout your essay and bibliography. Your supervisor can advise on the appropriate format.



Do not use AI-generated text in your Extended Essay. The IB's academic integrity policy explicitly prohibits the submission of AI-generated content as your own work. Use AI tools for research support only — never for generating the essay itself.

7.4 Formatting and Presentation

While presentation is not the primary focus of EE assessment, a well-formatted essay demonstrates professionalism and makes a positive impression on the examiner. Follow these formatting guidelines:

- Use a standard, readable font (e.g., Times New Roman 12pt or Arial 11pt) with double or 1.5 line spacing.
- Include a title page with your research question, subject, and candidate number (not your name).
- Use a contents page with accurate page numbers.
- Number all pages consecutively.
- Ensure that all tables, figures, and appendices are properly labelled and referenced in the text.

Section 8: Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

After reviewing hundreds of Extended Essays, the Eclassopedia team has identified a consistent set of mistakes that hold students back from top marks. Knowing these pitfalls in advance can save you enormous time and frustration.

Mistake 1: A Research Question That Is Too Broad

A broad research question produces a superficial essay. Students who try to cover too much ground inevitably skim the surface rather than achieving the depth of analysis that top marks require. The solution is to narrow your focus relentlessly — be specific about time, place, subject, and angle.

Mistake 2: Insufficient Engagement with Primary Sources

Many students rely almost entirely on secondary sources — textbooks, review articles, and websites. While secondary sources are valuable, top-scoring EEs engage substantively with primary material: original texts, experimental data, historical documents, or first-hand accounts. Seek out primary sources specific to your research question.

Mistake 3: Descriptive Rather Than Analytical Writing

Description tells the examiner what happened. Analysis tells the examiner why it happened, what it means, and how it relates to your research question. Every paragraph in your body should be doing analytical work — do not simply summarise your sources.

Mistake 4: Neglecting the RPPF

Some students treat the RPPF as an afterthought — a bureaucratic requirement to be completed at the last minute. This is a serious error. The RPPF carries up to 6 marks and is one of the easiest ways to boost your overall EE grade. Take your reflections seriously: write them thoughtfully, specifically, and honestly.

Mistake 5: Starting Too Late

The Extended Essay is a marathon, not a sprint. Students who begin their research and writing too close to the submission deadline consistently produce weaker essays than those who start early and allow themselves time for deep reading, revision, and reflection. Use the timeline provided in Section 3.4 and start immediately.

Section 9: Final Checklist Before Submission

Before submitting your Extended Essay, work through the following checklist to ensure everything is in order:

Research Question and Focus

- My research question is clearly stated in the introduction and consistently addressed throughout the essay.
- The essay does not exceed 4,000 words (excluding permitted exclusions).
- The subject-specific conventions of my EE discipline are applied throughout.

Content and Argument

- The argument is logical, progressive, and directly responsive to the research question.
- All evidence cited is relevant, credible, and properly attributed.
- Counterarguments and limitations are acknowledged and addressed.
- The conclusion directly and specifically answers the research question.

Sources and Citations

- All sources are cited in a consistent, subject-appropriate format.
- The bibliography is complete, accurate, and formatted correctly.
- No AI-generated content has been included.

Presentation

- The essay includes a title page with the research question (not my name).
- A table of contents is included with accurate page numbers.
- All pages are numbered consecutively.
- The formatting is consistent throughout.

RPPF

- All three RPPF reflections are completed and submitted.
- The reflections are honest, specific, and intellectually substantive.

Conclusion: Your Extended Essay Journey Starts Now

The Extended Essay is one of the most demanding — and most rewarding — academic experiences you will encounter in the IB Diploma Programme. It asks you to think independently,

research deeply, argue clearly, and reflect honestly. These are the skills that will serve you throughout your university career and beyond.

At Eclassopedia, we believe that every student has the capacity to produce a compelling Extended Essay. What it takes is not genius — it is curiosity, discipline, and a willingness to engage seriously with a question that matters to you. Start with that curiosity. Narrow it to a focused research question. Build your argument carefully and honestly. Revise with rigour and humility.

You have everything you need to succeed. Now all you need to do is begin.

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