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ULTIMATE IB DIPLOMA SURVIVAL GUIDE

Your Complete Roadmap to IB Success

Subjects | TOK | Extended Essay | CAS | Exams

Introduction: Why the IB Diploma Demands a Strategy

Congratulations on choosing — or already being enrolled in — the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP). Whether you're in Year 1 (Grade 11) or Year 2 (Grade 12), one truth applies universally: the IB rewards students who work smart, not just hard.

The IBDP is simultaneously one of the most rigorous and most rewarding high school qualifications in the world. Recognised by top universities on every continent, the diploma signals that you can think critically, manage competing demands, and engage with ideas across disciplines. But with six subjects at two different levels, plus Theory of Knowledge, an Extended Essay, and CAS requirements — all assessed concurrently — the programme can feel overwhelming.

This guide is your definitive roadmap. Whether you're struggling with time management, preparing for your first mock exams, writing your TOK essay, or researching your Extended Essay, you'll find concrete, actionable strategies here. Bookmark it, share it with classmates, and return to it throughout your two-year journey.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is written for IB Diploma students aged 16–19, their parents, and IB teachers seeking structured guidance on subject-specific strategies, Core components, and holistic planning. No prior IB knowledge is assumed.

How to Use This Guide

The guide is structured into four main parts: (1) subject-by-subject strategies covering all six IB subject groups; (2) deep dives into TOK, the Extended Essay, and CAS; (3) cross-cutting skills including time management, note-taking, and exam technique; and (4) resources, common pitfalls, and a master planning section. You can read it start to finish or jump directly to the sections most relevant to you right now.

Section Takeaways

- The IB rewards strategic planning from Day 1 of Year 1 — not just last-minute cramming.
- Understand how your six subjects, TOK, EE, and CAS interact to form the full diploma.
- This guide provides subject-specific strategies, timelines, checklists, and practical tips.
- Use the section takeaway boxes to review key points quickly before exams or deadlines.

Section 1: Understanding the IB Diploma Structure

1.1 The Six Subject Groups

Every IB Diploma candidate must take one subject from each of the following six groups. Three subjects are taken at Higher Level (HL) — roughly 240 teaching hours each — and three at Standard Level (SL) — roughly 150 hours each. Your HL choices should align with your university aspirations and genuine areas of strength.

Subject Group	Examples	Assessment Focus
Group 1: Language A (Literature/Language & Literature)	English A, Spanish A, French A	Literary analysis, language use, cultural context
Group 2: Language B / Ab Initio	French B, Mandarin B, Spanish Ab Initio	Language acquisition, receptive & productive skills
Group 3: Individuals & Societies	History, Economics, Geography, Psychology	Critical analysis, data interpretation, essay skills
Group 4: Sciences	Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Computer Science	Scientific inquiry, lab work (Internal Assessment), exams
Group 5: Mathematics	Analysis & Approaches (AA), Applications & Interpretation (AI)	Problem-solving, proofs, mathematical communication
Group 6: The Arts (or additional subject)	Visual Arts, Music, Theatre, or a 2nd subject	Portfolio/performance, process & reflection

1.2 The Scoring System

Each subject is scored on a scale of 1–7. The maximum diploma score is 45 points: 42 from subjects (6 subjects × 7 points) plus up to 3 bonus points awarded for combined performance in TOK and the Extended Essay. The minimum passing score is 24 points, provided all other conditions are met (no grade 1s, no more than one grade 2, etc.).

Bonus Points Matrix

EE Grade A or B + TOK Grade A or B = 3 bonus points. Other combinations yield 2 or 1 bonus point. Failing either TOK or the EE (Grade E) results in automatic diploma failure — treat them as seriously as your subjects.

1.3 Internal vs. External Assessment

IB assessment is divided between Internal Assessment (IA) — coursework marked by your teacher and moderated externally — and External Assessment (EA) — exams and written components marked by IB examiners worldwide. Understanding this split is essential because IA marks can be secured before exam season begins, reducing pressure in May/November.

Internal Assessment (IA)	External Assessment (EA)
Completed during Year 1–2	Taken in May (Northern Hemisphere) or November
Marked by your teacher, moderated by IB	Marked anonymously by IB examiners
Examples: Lab reports, oral exams, portfolios	Examples: Written papers, essays, listening tests
Typically 20–30% of total subject grade	Typically 70–80% of total subject grade
Submit drafts early and revise thoroughly	Prepare with past papers and timed conditions

Section Takeaways

- Take three subjects at HL aligned with your university direction and three at SL for breadth.
- Maximum is 45 points: 42 from subjects + up to 3 bonus from TOK/EE combination.
- IAs are your safety net — complete them early and to a high standard.
- Failing the EE or receiving a grade E in TOK means automatic diploma failure.

Section 2: Subject-Specific Study Strategies

Each IB subject has its own logic, assessment style, and study demands. The strategies below are tailored to each subject group and highlight the most high-impact actions you can take at both HL and SL.

2.1 Group 1: Language A (Literature & Language and Literature)

What examiners are really looking for

Language A is not simply about reading books — it is about constructing nuanced, well-evidenced literary and linguistic arguments. Examiners want to see personal engagement, command of literary terminology, and the ability to link textual evidence to broader themes, authorial choices, and cultural contexts.

HL vs. SL Key Differences

HL students study two additional literary works and are assessed on a Higher Level Essay (HLE) — a 1,200–1,500 word independent literary analysis submitted to the IB. SL students do not sit Paper 2 but complete an IO (Individual Oral) with the same structure.

Top Study Strategies for Language A

- Annotate every text actively: margins should be filled with thematic notes, literary device labels, and personal reactions.
- Build a literary vocabulary list: metaphor, analepsis, polyphony, unreliable narrator, bathos — the more precise your language, the higher you score.
- Practise timed Paper 1 (Guided Literary Analysis) on unseen texts — aim for 8–10 practice attempts before your exam.
- For Paper 2 (Comparative Essay): create a thematic comparison grid across your studied works before writing any practice essays.
- Record your Individual Oral practice and listen back critically — pacing, evidence selection, and fluency all improve this way.
- Use the assessment criteria as a checklist: Criterion A (Understanding & Interpretation), B (Analysis & Evaluation), C (Focus & Organisation), D (Language & Style).

Paper 1 Tip

Spend the first 10 minutes reading and annotating the text before writing a single word. Students who annotate first consistently outperform those who start writing immediately.

Individual Oral (IO) Checklist

1. Choose a global issue genuinely reflected in both texts (don't force it).
2. Select one extract from a literary work and one from a Body of Works text.
3. Practice a 10-minute delivery — time it exactly.
4. Prepare for likely examiner follow-up questions by asking a teacher to challenge you.
5. Record, review, and refine at least three times before the official submission.

Section Takeaways

- Annotate all texts actively and build a precise literary vocabulary throughout Year 1.
- Practise Paper 1 on unseen texts regularly — it is a skill that only improves with repetition.

- For the IO, choose a global issue that genuinely connects both texts; forced connections are transparent to examiners.
- HL students must submit a Higher Level Essay — start it no later than October of Year 2.

2.2 Group 2: Language B and Language Ab Initio

Understanding the Assessment Breakdown

Language B is designed for students with prior experience of the target language. Ab Initio is for true beginners. Both assess the same four macro-skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking — but at very different levels of complexity. The written exam for both courses includes Paper 1 (Productive skills — writing tasks) and Paper 2 (Receptive skills — reading comprehension), plus an Individual Oral.

Strategies for Language Acquisition

- Immerse yourself daily: 15–20 minutes of target-language content (podcasts, Netflix, news) accelerates acquisition faster than weekly study sessions.
- Vocabulary retention: use spaced repetition software (Anki, Quizlet) with sentence-level cards rather than isolated words.
- For Paper 1 (Writing): master the seven text types — blog post, essay, letter, speech, report, brochure, proposal. Each has conventions examiners expect.
- For the IO: choose a visual stimulus that connects to a global issue you can discuss fluently. Practice 'thinking aloud' in the target language.
- Ab Initio students: prioritise high-frequency vocabulary (top 500 words cover ~80% of everyday texts). Grammar accuracy matters more at this level than stylistic nuance.
- Language B HL: read authentic literary extracts and opinion pieces from native-language sources to elevate register and lexical range.

Language B SL Focus	Language B HL Focus
Accurate use of core grammar structures	Complex grammar + stylistic register variation
Text type conventions (7 types)	Same text types with greater sophistication
Approx. 1,500-word vocabulary base	Approx. 3,000-word vocabulary base
IO on visual stimulus only	IO includes literary text extract discussion
Listening Paper: standard difficulty	Listening Paper: complex native-speaker material

Section Takeaways

- Daily target-language immersion (even 15 minutes) dramatically outperforms weekly cramming.

Language B SL Focus	Language B HL Focus
• Master all seven IB text types and their structural conventions for Paper 1. • Ab Initio students: high-frequency vocabulary mastery is more valuable than complex grammar study. • Language B HL students should read authentic native-language media throughout the course.	

2.3 Group 3: Individuals and Societies

Overview of Group 3 Subjects

Group 3 subjects — History, Economics, Geography, Psychology, Business Management, Global Politics, and others — share a common emphasis on evidence-based argumentation, source analysis, and conceptual frameworks. While each subject has unique content, the study strategies below apply across the group.

History

History is the most essay-intensive Group 3 subject. Paper 1 (Source Analysis) and Paper 2 (Essay) at SL and the additional Paper 3 at HL demand different skills. For Paper 1, use the OPVL framework (Origin, Purpose, Value, Limitation) for source evaluation — but move beyond merely listing OPVL and connect it explicitly to the question. For Paper 2, practise 45-minute timed essays using the PEEL structure (Point, Evidence, Explain, Link). The Internal Assessment is a historical investigation of 2,200 words — choose a focused, genuine question with at least two perspectives.

Economics

Economics HL/SL requires fluency in both written commentary and diagrammatic analysis. Every paper response should include a correctly drawn and labelled diagram with direct commentary. For the IA portfolio (three commentaries), choose articles that allow you to demonstrate micro and macro concepts clearly. Time your practice essays to 45 minutes maximum and ensure every paragraph links to the question keyword.

Psychology

Psychology rewards students who can discuss research (studies) critically — not just describe them. Learn approximately 15–20 key studies in depth (design, procedure, findings, evaluation). For Paper 1, practise the SAQ (Short Answer Question) format: 9 marks, ~250 words, one clearly identified study. For the ERQ (Extended Response Question), use the 'Discuss' command term framework: present multiple perspectives, evaluate evidence, and reach a nuanced conclusion.

Geography

Geography combines fieldwork (IA), written papers, and a synoptic investigation at HL. The IA fieldwork report (25–30 marks) is a major opportunity for guaranteed marks — follow the methodology carefully. For the exam, practise with stimulus-based questions using real geographic data (maps, graphs, tables). HL Extension Paper 3 rewards sustained analytical writing — treat it like an essay, not a fill-in exercise.

Universal Group 3 Study Strategies

- Create a 'concept map' for each major topic linking causes, consequences, and key examples.
- Practise with past papers under timed conditions — Group 3 exams are almost always time-pressured.
- Maintain a 'command terms glossary': Analyse, Evaluate, Discuss, Examine, Compare all require distinct response types.
- For every case study or research example, learn: What? When? Why it matters? What it proves or challenges?
- Review IB markschemes as you practise — understanding what earns marks is more efficient than re-reading textbooks.

☑ Section Takeaways

- Every Group 3 subject rewards evidence-based, structured argumentation over narrative description.
- Practise with past papers and IB markschemes regularly — understand the rubric, not just the content.
- IAs in Group 3 are significant mark contributors — invest time proportional to their weighting.
- Master your subject's command terms: 'Evaluate' and 'Describe' require completely different responses.

2.4 Group 4: Sciences (Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Computer Science)

The Science Curriculum at a Glance

All Group 4 subjects share a common Internal Assessment structure — the scientific investigation — and require students to engage with the Nature of Science (NOS) as a unifying framework. The external assessment typically includes multiple-choice, data-based questions, and extended response essays. HL students cover additional topics and are assessed at greater depth and complexity.

Biology HL/SL

Biology is content-heavy — there is no shortcut to knowing the material. However, the exam rewards application over memorisation. Practise interpreting unfamiliar data (graphs, tables, experimental results) by working through Paper 2 data-based questions. Use diagrams extensively: cell diagrams, food webs, biochemical pathways. For HL Option topics, choose the one that most complements your other subjects or interests — your motivation will show in your depth of knowledge.

Chemistry HL/SL

Chemistry requires both conceptual understanding and mathematical facility. Master the core calculation types early (moles, titrations, enthalpy, equilibrium constants) so they are automatic under exam pressure. Use the IB Data Booklet throughout your study — do not try to memorise formulas it provides. For HL, topics like organic chemistry mechanisms and spectroscopy require pattern recognition; use annotated practice sets extensively.

Physics HL/SL

Physics HL is consistently ranked among the most demanding IB courses. Success depends on moving between conceptual understanding and mathematical problem-solving fluidly. Work through every type of calculation systematically, check units at every step, and use vector diagrams for mechanics problems. Option topics (Astrophysics, Engineering Physics, etc.) are excellent extended essay territories — your IA supervisor may also have Option expertise.

Computer Science HL/SL

Computer Science is unique in Group 4 for its emphasis on programming, system design, and the IA — a 30-hour software development project. Start the IA early (Year 1) with a real client and a clearly scoped problem. For the exams, practise pseudo-code questions (the IB has its own syntax — learn it precisely) and be confident discussing data structures, algorithms, and OOP concepts with examples.

The Science Internal Assessment (IA)

The Science IA is a 6–12 page report of an original investigation worth approximately 20–24% of your total subject grade. Choose a research question that is genuinely interesting to you, feasible within your school's facilities, and specific enough to allow meaningful quantitative analysis.

IA Golden Rule

Your Research Question must be narrow and testable. 'How does temperature affect enzyme activity?' is too broad. 'How does temperature (20°C–60°C) affect the rate of amylase-catalysed starch hydrolysis as measured by iodine absorbance?' is specific and assessable.

IA Assessment Criteria (out of 24)

Criterion	Focus	Marks
Exploration	RQ, background, methodology rationale	6
Analysis	Data processing, graphs, statistical tests	6
Evaluation	Strengths, limitations, improvements	6
Communication	Structure, format, clarity	4
Personal Engagement	Authentic interest and ownership	2

Section Takeaways

- Science IAs are worth up to 24% of your grade — start early and choose a specific, original research question.
- Practise interpreting unfamiliar data in past papers — examiners always include novel experimental results.

Criterion	Focus	Marks

- Use the IB Data Booklet in all your study sessions, not just exams.
- For Chemistry and Physics, master all calculation types early so they are automatic under exam conditions.

2.5 Group 5: Mathematics (Analysis & Approaches and Applications & Interpretation)

Choosing the Right Mathematics Course

The IB offers four mathematics courses: Mathematics: Analysis and Approaches (AA) HL and SL, and Mathematics: Applications and Interpretation (AI) HL and SL. AA emphasises pure mathematics, proofs, and abstract problem-solving — it is the preferred choice for students heading toward STEM degrees. AI emphasises modelling, statistics, and technology — it suits students in social sciences, business, or arts. Both courses have legitimate value; choose based on your genuine strengths and university requirements.

Math AA (Analysis & Approaches)	Math AI (Applications & Interpretation)
Strong algebraic manipulation required	Strong statistical and modelling intuition
Less GDC reliance (especially SL Paper 1)	GDC used extensively throughout
Proof and theoretical rigour emphasised	Real-world application contexts emphasised
Preferred for Engineering, Physics, CS degrees	Preferred for Social Science, Business, Design degrees
HL: one of the most demanding IB courses	HL: also rigorous, especially statistics depth

Study Strategies for Mathematics

- Mathematics is a skill, not a subject — you must practise problems daily, not just re-read notes.
- Work through each topic in three phases: understand the concept, practise standard questions, then attempt unfamiliar problem types.
- Build an 'error log': every time you make a mistake in practice, record it, identify the conceptual gap, and revisit it a week later.
- For Paper 1 (no GDC): practise calculation-heavy problems by hand regularly. Many students become over-reliant on their calculator.
- For Paper 2/3 (GDC permitted): know your calculator's functions deeply — regression, integration, solving equations. Many marks are lost to calculator unfamiliarity.
- The Internal Assessment (Mathematical Exploration, 12–20 pages): choose a topic that genuinely interests you and allows mathematical depth. Avoid overly common topics (Fibonacci, Monty Hall) — examiners have seen hundreds of them.

IA Mathematical Exploration — High-Scoring Topics by Course

Math AA Exploration Ideas	Math AI Exploration Ideas
Investigating convergence of infinite series	Modelling disease spread using logistic functions
Complex numbers in fractal geometry (Mandelbrot)	Statistical analysis of sports performance data
Proof of the Fundamental Theorem of Calculus	SIR model for epidemic prediction
Investigating parametric equations in engineering	Optimisation problems in urban planning
Number theory: prime distribution patterns	Time series analysis of economic indicators

Section Takeaways

- Choose AA for STEM pathways and AI for social/applied science pathways — but confirm with your university.
- Daily problem practice beats weekly cramming — mathematics is a physical skill as much as a cognitive one.
- Build and review an error log weekly to systematically close knowledge gaps.
- For the IA, pick an original topic you genuinely find curious — authentic engagement is obvious to examiners.

2.6 Group 6: The Arts (Visual Arts, Music, Theatre)

Why The Arts Are Underestimated

Many students — and parents — underestimate Group 6 subjects, assuming they are 'easy' compared to sciences or mathematics. In practice, IB Arts courses demand sustained creative and critical engagement throughout both years, with large portfolio or performance requirements that cannot be rushed at the end.

Visual Arts (SL/HL)

Visual Arts is assessed through a portfolio of artworks, an Investigative Workbook (process documentation), and a Comparative Study (HL: 10–15 works; SL: 8–10 works). The Comparative Study requires written analysis of works from different cultural or historical contexts — treat it as an analytical essay with visual evidence, not merely a description of images. Your Investigative Workbook should show genuine experimentation, reflection, and development; examiners want to see your thinking process, not just polished outcomes.

Music (SL/HL)

Music IA components include a Musical Links Investigation (written) and a Performing or Creating portfolio. Plan your performance pieces early — 15–20 minutes of repertoire at HL takes two years of consistent practice. The Musical Links Investigation requires you to analyse connections between two works from contrasting musical cultures using specific musical vocabulary (texture, timbre, rhythm, form).

Theatre (SL/HL)

Theatre has three assessed components: a Research Presentation (exploring a theatre tradition), a Director's Notebook (HL only), and a Solo Theatre Piece. Each requires distinct skill sets. The Research Presentation rewards genuine ethnographic curiosity — choose a theatre tradition (Noh, Commedia dell'Arte, Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed) that you can explore with genuine depth rather than superficial comparison.

Universal Arts Strategies

- Document everything: the IB rewards process and reflection, not just final outcomes.
- Seek feedback from your teacher at every major milestone and revise accordingly.
- Engage with the IB assessment criteria from the beginning — don't discover them in Year 2.
- Connect your creative work to broader cultural, historical, or theoretical contexts explicitly.

☑ Section Takeaways

- Arts subjects require consistent effort throughout two years — they cannot be completed in a final rush.
- The IB rewards documented process and critical reflection alongside the final artwork or performance.
- Build explicit connections between your creative work and cultural/theoretical contexts.
- If taking a second subject instead of Arts, ensure it strengthens your university application profile.

Section 3: Mastering the IB Core — TOK, EE, and CAS

The IB Core is what distinguishes the Diploma from other qualifications. Theory of Knowledge, the Extended Essay, and Creativity, Activity, Service are not optional add-ons — they are integral to the diploma's intellectual identity and account for up to 3 bonus points. Treat them with the same strategic attention you give your subjects.

3.1 Theory of Knowledge (TOK)

What Is TOK, Really?

Theory of Knowledge is a course in epistemology — the study of knowledge itself. It asks: How do we know what we know? What counts as evidence? How do our language, culture, reason, and emotion shape our understanding? These are not abstract philosophical puzzles — they are questions that excellent thinkers in every field engage with daily.

TOK is assessed through two components: the TOK Exhibition (worth 33% of the TOK grade) and the TOK Essay (worth 67%). Together, they determine your letter grade (A–E), which feeds into the bonus points calculation.

The TOK Exhibition

The TOK Exhibition requires you to select three 'objects' (physical or digital items) and connect each one to a single prescribed prompt, exploring how that prompt is illuminated by each object. The exhibition is internally assessed (your teacher marks it) and externally moderated.

Exhibition Strategy

- Choose real, specific objects — a handwritten letter, a specific newspaper front page, a scientific instrument — not generic abstractions.
- Select a prompt where you can write genuinely different analyses for each object, not three versions of the same argument.
- Each object should connect to the same prompt from a different angle — one might highlight knowledge production, another knowledge transmission, another knowledge reception.
- Write 100 words maximum per object. Be precise and avoid padding — every sentence must earn its place.

Sample Exhibition Prompts (from IB Prescribed List)

Strong Exhibition Prompt Examples

"What counts as knowledge?" | "Does our knowledge depend on our interactions with other knowers?" | "Is bias inevitable in the production of knowledge?" | "How do we know what is true?" | "Are some things unknowable?"

The TOK Essay

The TOK Essay is a 1,200–1,600 word response to one of six Prescribed Titles released by the IB each year. It is externally assessed and accounts for the majority of your TOK grade. The essay must engage genuinely with the question — it is not a standard school essay but a philosophical argument with real-world knowledge examples.

TOK Essay Writing Framework

6. Unpack the Prescribed Title carefully: identify every significant term and its possible interpretations.
7. Develop your thesis — a clear, arguable position in response to the question. Avoid sitting on the fence.
8. Select two Areas of Knowledge (AoK) that allow for meaningful contrast: Natural Sciences vs. History, Mathematics vs. The Arts, etc.
9. For each AoK, develop a real-world knowledge example (RLS) that genuinely supports your argument — not just illustrates it.
10. Anticipate and genuinely engage with a counter-claim — do not dismiss it but show why it doesn't defeat your thesis.
11. Conclude by explaining the significance of your argument for how we understand knowledge.

Sample TOK Essay Titles and Approaches

Prescribed Title Style	Suggested Approach
"To what extent does language shape knowledge?"	Compare how scientific naming conventions shape biological knowledge vs. how political language shapes historical understanding
"Is all knowledge ultimately reducible to emotion?"	Challenge this in Mathematics (proof is non-emotional) while affirming it in Ethics (moral intuition precedes reasoning)
"Does the knower's perspective strengthen or limit the pursuit of knowledge?"	Compare historian's positionality in IH vs. observer bias in experimental sciences

Common TOK Essay Mistakes to Avoid

1. Writing a subject essay in disguise (discussing History at length without epistemological analysis). 2. Using examples decoratively rather than analytically. 3. Vague, undefined use of terms like 'knowledge,' 'truth,' or 'certainty.' 4. Failing to acknowledge the genuine complexity of the question. 5. Exceeding 1,600 words.

Section Takeaways

- TOK rewards genuine philosophical curiosity — approach it as an intellectual adventure, not a checkbox.
- For the Exhibition: choose specific, real objects and connect them to your prompt with precision.
- For the Essay: develop a clear, defensible thesis and use knowledge examples analytically (not decoratively).
- Plan your TOK Essay draft in October of Year 2 to leave time for revision and teacher feedback.

3.2 The Extended Essay (EE)

Overview: Your IB Research Project

The Extended Essay is a 4,000-word independently researched essay on a topic of your choice, completed under the supervision of a subject teacher. It is one of the most substantial intellectual undertakings of your high school career — and one of the most rewarding when done well. Universities worldwide regard a strong Extended Essay as evidence of genuine academic capability.

Choosing Your EE Subject and Research Question

The choice of subject and research question is the single most important EE decision. Choose a subject you are passionate about AND have strong foundational knowledge in. Your research question must be: focused (not answerable in a paragraph), original (not a textbook restatement), researchable (with available sources), and arguable (not purely factual).

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Extended Essay Research Question Examples by Subject

Subject	Weak RQ (Too Broad)	Strong RQ (Focused)
History	How did World War II affect Europe?	To what extent did the Allied bombing campaign of Dresden (February 1945) constitute a war crime under contemporary international law?
Chemistry	How do enzymes work?	How does pH variation (4–10) affect the rate of papain-catalysed casein hydrolysis as measured by turbidimetry?
Economics	Is globalisation good or bad?	To what extent has the 2018–2020 US-China trade war affected Vietnamese export volumes in the electronics sector?
English A	What are the themes in 1984?	How does Orwell use spatial imagery in Nineteen Eighty-Four to construct the psychological architecture of totalitarian control?
Psychology	Does social media affect teenagers?	To what extent does passive Instagram use correlate with increased depressive symptomatology in female adolescents aged 14–17?

The EE Timeline (24-Month Plan)

Period	Milestone	Key Actions
September Year 1	Subject and supervisor confirmed	Meet supervisor, explore topic areas, read broadly
November Year 1	Initial Research Question drafted	First supervisor meeting, narrow the RQ, begin source search
January Year 1	Research & reading phase	Annotate 10–15 key sources, build preliminary bibliography
March Year 1	First Reflection Session (RPPF)	Complete Reflection 1 in the RPPF honestly
June Year 1	Detailed outline submitted	Chapter outline, thesis draft, supervisor feedback
September Year 2	Full first draft (3,500–4,000 words)	Submit to supervisor for feedback

Period	Milestone	Key Actions
October Year 2	Second Reflection Session (RPPF)	Complete Reflection 2 — note what changed and why
November Year 2	Revised second draft	Incorporate supervisor feedback, strengthen argument
December Year 2	Final EE submitted	Final proofread, bibliography check, RPPF completed
January Year 3 (exams)	Viva Voce	Brief oral reflection — 10–15 minutes with supervisor

EE Assessment Criteria (New Format: 2018–present)

Criterion	Maximum Marks
A: Focus and Method	6
B: Knowledge and Understanding	6
C: Critical Thinking	12
D: Presentation	4
E: Engagement (from RPPF)	6
TOTAL	34

Criterion C is worth 35% of your EE grade

Critical Thinking — demonstrating genuine analytical insight, engaging with counter-evidence, and developing an original argument — is by far the most heavily weighted criterion. An EE that merely describes and summarises will score no higher than a C.

Writing the Extended Essay: Practical Tips

- Write your introduction last — once you have completed the body of your argument, you know exactly what you are introducing.
- Every paragraph should open with a topic sentence, contain evidence (quotations, data, examples), and close with an analytical sentence linking back to the RQ.
- Use your word count strategically: a 4,000-word essay with a 1,500-word literature review and 500-word conclusion is badly structured. Aim for: Introduction (300–400 words), Body (2,800–3,000 words), Conclusion (350–450 words).
- Cite all sources using a consistent citation style (MLA, APA, or Chicago — check your supervisor's preference). The IB does not mandate a single style.
- The Reflections on Planning and Progress Form (RPPF) is an assessed component — write each entry genuinely, showing intellectual development.

Section Takeaways

- Start your EE in September of Year 1 — students who begin late produce significantly weaker essays.
- Your Research Question is your most important decision — spend two to three weeks refining it before committing.
- Criterion C (Critical Thinking) is worth 35% of your EE marks — analysis must dominate, not description.
- Treat the RPPF as a genuine reflective journal, not a formality — it contributes 6 marks directly.

3.3 Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS)

Understanding CAS Requirements

CAS is the experiential dimension of the IB Diploma. It is not marked numerically — you either complete it satisfactorily or you do not. However, failure to complete CAS results in automatic diploma failure. The IB requires engagement with three strands: Creativity (artistic and creative thinking), Activity (physical exertion), and Service (unpaid contribution to community).

The Seven CAS Learning Outcomes

Every CAS activity should connect to at least one of the seven IB CAS Learning Outcomes. Your CAS portfolio must demonstrate all seven across your two years:

12. Identify own strengths and develop areas for growth.
13. Demonstrate that challenges have been undertaken.
14. Demonstrate how to initiate and plan a CAS experience.
15. Show commitment to and perseverance in CAS experiences.
16. Demonstrate the skills and recognise the benefits of working collaboratively.
17. Demonstrate engagement with issues of global significance.
18. Recognise and consider the ethics of choices and actions.

CAS Project Requirement

At least one CAS Project — a collaborative, sustained activity involving all three strands — must be completed. Plan this early: a community garden, a school arts festival, a charity sports event, or a cultural exchange programme all work well.

CAS Planning and Documentation

Most schools use ManageBac or an equivalent digital portfolio to record CAS. Regardless of the platform, the key to satisfying CAS requirements is consistent, reflective documentation throughout Year 1 and Year 2 — not a rushed catch-up in Year 2, Term 3.

CAS Documentation Checklist

- Write reflective journal entries after each activity (not just at milestones) — show genuine personal development.
- Include evidence (photos, certificates, supervisor comments) for major activities.
- Map each activity explicitly to one or more CAS Learning Outcomes.
- Plan your CAS Project in Year 1 and begin executing by the end of Year 1 Term 2.
- Ensure all three strands are represented — some students over-focus on Service and neglect Creativity.

CAS Activity Ideas by Strand

Creativity	Activity	Service
Start a podcast or YouTube channel	Join a school sports team	Tutor younger students
Learn a new musical instrument	Take up yoga or martial arts	Volunteer at a food bank or shelter
Produce a short film or photography project	Organise a school walkathon	Lead a sustainability initiative
Start a literary magazine or school zine	Train for and complete a 5K run	Mentor primary school students
Design and sew a garment	Learn rock climbing or swimming	Organise a community clean-up drive

Section Takeaways

- CAS failure means diploma failure — do not treat it as an afterthought.
- Document activities reflectively throughout Year 1–2, not in a Year 2 rush.
- Demonstrate all seven Learning Outcomes across your CAS portfolio.
- Your CAS Project should be collaborative, sustained, and combine all three strands.

Section 4: Cross-Cutting Skills for IB Success

4.1 Time Management and Study Scheduling

The IB Time Management Challenge

The most common reason IB students underperform is not lack of intelligence — it is poor time management. With six subjects, three core components, school activities, and a personal life, the IB student's calendar is genuinely full. The solution is not to study more hours — it is to study the right things at the right times.

Sample Two-Year Study Timetable Structure

The following timetable structure is a guide for managing your IB commitments. Adapt it to your school schedule, but preserve the core principles: protected deep-work blocks, regular review cycles, and non-negotiable recovery time.

Day Block	Year 1 Focus	Year 2 Focus
Monday Evening (90 min)	Subject content — new material review	Past paper practice — exam technique
Tuesday Evening (90 min)	EE research / reading	EE drafting and revision
Wednesday Evening (60 min)	TOK reading or exhibition work	TOK essay drafting
Thursday Evening (90 min)	Subject content — problem sets/essays	Past paper + markscheme review
Friday Evening (60 min)	Light review + weekly planning	Light review + weekly planning
Saturday Morning (2–3 hrs)	Deep study: hardest subject or IA work	Deep study: exam-season past papers
Sunday Afternoon (1–2 hrs)	CAS activities / reflection writing	Consolidation + error log review

The Weekly Planning Rule

Every Sunday evening, spend 20 minutes reviewing the coming week: What deadlines are approaching? Which subjects need attention? What CAS must be documented? This 20-minute investment prevents the 'I forgot about that deadline' crisis.

Priority Matrix for IB Tasks

Not all tasks deserve equal time. Use this framework to decide where to invest effort:

High Impact / Urgent	High Impact / Not Urgent
IA due this week	EE outline due next month
TOK essay draft due	Building vocabulary for Language B
Mock exam preparation	Reading broadly for Group 3 case studies
This week's assignment	Practising past papers for future topics

4.2 Effective Note-Taking Strategies

Why Most IB Note-Taking is Inefficient

Copying slides or textbook content verbatim is passive and produces notes that feel comprehensive but facilitate very little learning. The most effective note-taking methods for IB are those that force active processing during the note-taking itself.

The Cornell Note Method (for Group 3 and Language A)

Divide each page into three sections: a narrow left column (cues/questions), a wide right column (notes), and a bottom section (summary). After class, add questions in the left column that your right-column notes answer. Then write a three-sentence summary at the bottom. Review by covering the right column and answering questions from memory.

The Concept Map Method (for Group 4 Sciences and Group 5)

After each topic, create a concept map linking key terms, principles, and processes. For Biology, your map might link 'cell respiration' to 'ATP production,' 'Krebs cycle,' 'electron transport chain,' 'aerobic vs. anaerobic,' and 'relevant IB studies.' These maps serve as powerful revision tools and reveal gaps in your understanding.

Flashcards with Spaced Repetition (for Group 2 and Sciences)

Use Anki or a similar spaced repetition tool for vocabulary, definitions, formulas, and key studies. The spaced repetition algorithm ensures you review material precisely when you are about to forget it, maximising long-term retention with minimum review time. Aim for 20–30 minutes of Anki review daily rather than long weekly sessions.

4.3 Critical Thinking and Exam Command Terms

The IB Command Terms Hierarchy

Every IB exam question is governed by a command term that specifies the required response type. Many students lose marks not from lack of knowledge but from misreading command terms. The IB organises command terms into assessment objectives (AO1–AO4) in ascending cognitive complexity:

Command Term	What it Means	Response Type
State / Identify / Name	Give a brief, specific answer	1–2 sentences, no explanation needed
Describe / Outline / Summarise	Give the main features	Several sentences; factual, not analytical
Explain / Justify	Give reasons and mechanisms	Multiple paragraphs; cause-and-effect relationships
Analyse	Break down into components and examine each	Structured essay; identify parts, examine interactions
Evaluate / Assess	Make a judgement with evidence on both sides	Balanced essay with conclusion and qualification
Discuss	Examine multiple perspectives thoroughly	Extended essay exploring tensions and complexity
Compare and Contrast	Identify similarities AND differences explicitly	Structured with explicit linking language

4.4 Stress Management and Mental Health

The IB and Student Wellbeing

The IB programme makes genuine academic demands, and it is normal to feel stressed, overwhelmed, or anxious at various points across two years. What matters is having strategies to manage these feelings constructively before they become chronic.

Evidence-Based Stress Reduction Strategies

- Prioritise sleep: 8–9 hours of quality sleep per night is not a luxury — it is neurologically essential for memory consolidation, attention, and emotional regulation. Late-night studying that cuts into sleep is, on balance, counterproductive.
- Exercise regularly: even 30 minutes of moderate exercise three times per week has been shown to reduce anxiety, improve concentration, and enhance mood. This also satisfies your CAS Activity requirement.
- Schedule genuine downtime: socialising, hobbies, and rest are not procrastination — they are recovery. Scheduled recovery makes productive study possible.
- Talk to your TOK or IB Coordinator: many schools have wellbeing programmes specifically for IB students. Use them. Acknowledging struggle is a sign of self-awareness, not weakness.
- Use the 'body double' technique: studying alongside a friend (in person or on video call) often increases focus and accountability, even if you are working on different subjects.

Red Flags — When to Seek Support

Persistent inability to sleep or eat, feeling hopeless for more than two weeks, withdrawal from friends and family, or experiencing panic attacks are signs to speak with a school counsellor, doctor, or trusted adult. Academic performance is never worth your mental health.

☑ Section Takeaways

- Study smart, not just long — protect deep work blocks and plan weekly with a 20-minute Sunday review.
- Active note-taking methods (Cornell, concept maps, spaced repetition) are far superior to passive copying.
- Memorise the IB command terms and respond precisely to what each question is asking.
- Protect sleep, exercise, and genuine downtime — these are preconditions for sustainable high performance.

Section 5: Exam Preparation and Exam Day Strategy

5.1 Building Your Revision Plan (Six Weeks Out)

The Six-Week Countdown Framework

Six weeks before your first exam, begin a structured revision programme. The key principle is not to start from the beginning of each course but to identify your knowledge gaps and target them systematically.

19. Week 1: Diagnostic pass through all subjects. Complete one past paper per subject under timed conditions. Identify the three weakest topics per subject.
20. Week 2: Deep revision of weakest topics. Focus on understanding, not memorisation. Use concept maps, textbooks, and teacher explanations.
21. Week 3: Past paper practice on weak topics only. Use IB markschemes to self-assess ruthlessly.
22. Week 4: Full papers under exam conditions for all subjects. Time them precisely. Assess and compare against markschemes.
23. Week 5: Targeted revision of remaining gaps identified in Week 4 practice papers. Prioritise high-mark question types.
24. Week 6: Light revision, consolidation, and exam day logistics. No new content. Sleep. Eat well.

5.2 Using Past Papers Effectively

Past papers are the single most valuable revision resource for IB students. However, most students use them suboptimally — completing papers casually, then checking answers without deep analysis of mistakes. The following approach is far more effective:

The Four-Step Past Paper Method

25. Complete the paper under strict exam conditions (correct timing, no notes, no internet).
26. Mark it against the official IB markscheme — be honest, not generous, about partial marks.
27. For every lost mark, identify the root cause: knowledge gap, misread command term, time pressure, or presentation issue.
28. Address each root cause before doing the next paper — otherwise you practise the same errors repeatedly.

Where to Find IB Past Papers

Official IB past papers are available through your school's IB Online Curriculum Centre (OCC). Additional resources include Revision Village (Mathematics), IB Documents (community-shared resources), and subject-specific YouTube channels. Your IB coordinator can also provide previous years' papers.

5.3 Exam Day Protocol

The Night Before

- Prepare all equipment: two pens, pencils, ruler, calculator (check it is the approved model), coloured pencils if needed, student ID.
- Know your exam start time and location — confirm both with your IB coordinator the day before.
- Review one page of notes per subject (high-level summary only) and then stop studying by 9pm.
- Eat a proper meal and get to bed at your normal time. Extra-late studying the night before an exam consistently hurts performance.

Morning of the Exam

- Eat a protein-rich breakfast (eggs, yoghurt, nuts) — glucose-heavy foods cause energy crashes during a 3-hour paper.
- Arrive 15–20 minutes early to settle mentally and review your equipment calmly.
- Avoid discussing the exam content with classmates immediately before entering — it increases anxiety without adding knowledge.

During the Exam

- Read the entire paper before writing a word. Identify which questions you will answer and in what order.
- Allocate time per question based on marks: a 10-mark question should receive approximately 10–15 minutes.
- Start with questions you are most confident about — early success builds momentum and reduces anxiety.
- Never leave a question blank: even partial credit is better than zero. Write what you know, even if incomplete.
- For essay questions: spend 5 minutes planning before writing. A planned essay almost always outscores an unplanned one.
- Leave 10 minutes at the end to review: check units, labels, and that your name and candidate number are on every paper.

Section Takeaways

- Start past-paper practice six weeks before exams using the four-step method — not casual reading.
- Allocate exam time proportional to marks — and never leave a question blank.
- Exam night: prepare equipment, review briefly, and stop studying by 9pm. Sleep is your most powerful revision tool.
- During the exam: plan essays before writing, start with your strongest questions, and review at the end.

Section 6: Integrating Everything — Your Master IB Plan

6.1 The Two-Year Master Timeline

Use the following timeline as your master planning document. Pin it to your wall, add it to your digital calendar, and review it at the start of each term with your IB Coordinator.

Period	Subject Priorities	Core Priorities
Year 1, Term 1 (Sep–Dec)	Establish strong foundations; complete first IA drafts in at least two subjects	Choose EE subject & supervisor; begin TOK Exhibition objects
Year 1, Term 2 (Jan–Mar)	First IA submissions; Group 4 project completion; Language A IO preparation begins	EE RQ finalised; first RPPF entry; CAS Project planning begins
Year 1, Term 3 (Apr–Jun)	Year 1 exams / assessments; IAs for remaining subjects initiated	EE outline submitted; CAS activities documented; TOK Exhibition draft
Year 2, Term 1 (Sep–Nov)	Complete all IAs; oral exams for Language A and B	EE first full draft; TOK Essay prescribed title choice; second RPPF
Year 2, Term 2 (Dec–Feb)	Mock exams; intensive past-paper revision begins	EE final submission; TOK Essay final draft; CAS project completion
Year 2, Term 3 (Mar–May)	External exams (May session)	TOK Essay final submission; Viva Voce; RPPF complete

6.2 Subject Choice and HL Decision Checklist

If you are still in the process of choosing subjects or levels, use this checklist to guide your decisions:

- Research your top 3–5 university courses: identify which IB subjects they require or recommend at HL.
- Take HL in subjects where your genuine aptitude meets university requirements — not just where you currently score highest.
- Discuss with your IB Coordinator: some subject combinations are restricted due to teacher availability or DP regulations.
- Consider workload balance: avoid taking all three of Chemistry HL, Physics HL, and Mathematics AA HL unless you are exceptionally strong in sciences.
- Remember that Group 6 can be replaced by a fourth Group 3 or Group 4 subject — choose based on university requirements.

6.3 Connecting TOK, EE, and Your Subjects

One underexplored advantage of the IB is the synergy available between your subjects, TOK, and EE. Students who exploit these connections produce more coherent, insightful work across all components.

- If your EE is in History, your TOK essay could explore the epistemology of historical evidence — you gain dual benefit from your research.
- If your EE is in Chemistry, discuss the Nature of Science within your EE introduction — it addresses both Chemistry assessment criteria and demonstrates TOK thinking.
- Your CAS Service project could become a rich source of real-world knowledge examples in your TOK Exhibition.
- Group 4 project work often generates questions worth developing into TOK Exhibition objects.

Section Takeaways

- Map your entire two-year journey with the master timeline — review it each term with your IB coordinator.
- HL choices should align with university requirements and genuine academic strength, not just current grade averages.
- Exploit the synergies between TOK, EE, and your subjects — they are designed to complement each other.
- Complete IAs as early as possible — they provide guaranteed marks before exam season pressure peaks.

Section 7: Common IB Challenges and How to Overcome Them

7.1 'I'm Falling Behind on Everything'

This is the most common crisis IB students experience — usually in the middle of Year 1 or at the start of Year 2. The solution is triage, not panic. Immediately identify your three most urgent tasks (typically those closest to a deadline), communicate with your teachers if you need extensions, and simplify your schedule temporarily. Trying to catch up on everything simultaneously usually results in catching up on nothing.

7.2 Writer's Block on the EE

If you have been staring at a blank page for more than 30 minutes, your problem is not writing — it is thinking. Step away from the document and spend 20 minutes explaining your argument out loud, as if to a friend. Record yourself if helpful. Then transcribe and refine what you said. This oral-to-written method bypasses perfectionism paralysis reliably.

7.3 'I Don't Understand What TOK Is Asking'

This is extremely common, especially in Year 1. TOK asks questions about the nature, structure, and justification of knowledge — not about the content of specific subjects. When asked 'How do we know that X is true?', the IB wants you to examine the types of evidence used, the assumptions behind them, and the limitations of the knowledge-producing method. Start by asking: 'What counts as evidence in this field, and who decides?'

7.4 Exam Anxiety

Exam anxiety is physiologically identical to excitement — both involve elevated heart rate, heightened attention, and adrenaline. Reframing anxiety as 'useful arousal' is a research-backed strategy (called cognitive reappraisal) that measurably improves exam performance. Controlled breathing exercises (4 counts in, 7 hold, 8 out) also rapidly reduce acute anxiety symptoms. If exam anxiety is severe and chronic, please speak with your school counsellor or a healthcare professional.

7.5 Dealing with a Poor Mock Exam Result

Mock exam results are diagnostic tools, not predictors of your final outcome. Many students who struggle in mocks perform significantly better in May/November exams — because mocks reveal gaps that can then be systematically addressed. Treat a poor mock result as the most valuable piece of feedback you will receive all year: analyse every lost mark, build a targeted revision plan, and thank the result for telling you exactly what to work on.

Section Takeaways

- When overwhelmed, triage ruthlessly — identify the three most urgent tasks and focus only on those.
- EE writer's block? Talk through your argument out loud, record it, then transcribe and refine.
- Reframe exam anxiety as useful arousal — the physiology is identical to excitement.
- Poor mock results are diagnostic gifts: every lost mark tells you precisely what to revise.

Section 8: Essential Resources for Every IB Student

8.1 Official IB Resources

- My IB (myib.ibo.org): Access your subject guides, assessment criteria, and the RPPF for your EE.
- IB Online Curriculum Centre (OCC): Past papers, teacher resources, and subject-specific guidance notes.
- IB Subject Guides: Download the current Subject Guide for every one of your six subjects. This is your primary revision reference — not a textbook.

8.2 Subject-Specific Resources

Subject/Area	Recommended Resource
Mathematics AA/AI	Revision Village (revisionvillage.com) — past papers, video solutions, predicted papers
Sciences (all)	Sciencemusicchem on YouTube; IB Bio/Chem/Physics HL channels
History	IB History Review magazine; 'Mastering History' by Cambridge University Press
Economics	EconplusDal on YouTube; InThinking Economics
TOK	IB Theory of Knowledge by Richard van de Lagemaat; TOK Chat podcast
Extended Essay	IB's EE Handbook (official); your subject teacher and university librarian
Language B/Ab Initio	Duolingo (maintenance), LingQ (reading), Netflix in target language with subtitles
Mathematics IA	Nrich.maths.org for exploration ideas; WolframAlpha for computation verification

8.3 Study Tools and Apps

- Anki (spaced repetition flashcards) — free and available on all platforms.
- Notion or OneNote — build a subject-organised digital notebook with IB criteria as template headers.
- ManageBac — most IB schools use this for CAS tracking, assignment deadlines, and IB documentation.
- Forest App — a gamified focus timer that blocks distracting apps during study sessions.
- Google Scholar — for finding peer-reviewed sources for your Extended Essay and Science IA.
- Zotero — free citation manager for collecting, organising, and citing EE sources in any format.

8.4 Community and Peer Support

- r/IBO on Reddit — a large, active community of IB students sharing resources, past papers, and advice.
- IB Survivors Discord — real-time help from current students and recent graduates.
- Your school's IB Coordinator — an underused resource; they have direct communication with the IB and can provide subject-specific guidance.
- Study groups — peer teaching is one of the most effective learning strategies known. Explaining a concept to a classmate reveals gaps in your own understanding immediately.

Section Takeaways

- Your IB Subject Guides are your most important revision documents — download all six immediately.
- Past papers + official IB markschemes are more valuable for exam prep than any published study guide.
- Use Anki for vocabulary and definitions, Google Scholar for EE research, and Zotero for citation management.
- Connect with the IB student community online — collective intelligence is a genuine IB revision advantage.

Conclusion: Your IB Journey Starts Now

You have just read over 5,000 words of strategic guidance, subject-specific advice, and practical frameworks for navigating the IB Diploma. That investment of time is itself an act of intentional study — and it signals exactly the kind of proactive, reflective mindset that the IB is designed to cultivate.

Let's return to the core truth: the IB Diploma rewards students who work with clarity and purpose. Not the students who work the most hours, but the students who work on the right things, at the right times, with genuine intellectual engagement. Every subject strategy in this guide, every EE tip, every TOK framework — they all point toward the same underlying skill: learning how to learn.

The Extended Essay will teach you how to pursue a question with rigour and persistence. Theory of Knowledge will teach you to examine your own assumptions. CAS will teach you that growth happens at the edge of your comfort zone. Your six subjects will teach you that different disciplines have different — and equally legitimate — ways of knowing the world. These are not just IB requirements. They are the intellectual habits of a lifetime.

Your Five Immediate Next Actions

29. Download your IB Subject Guide for each of your six subjects today and read the assessment criteria section for each one.
30. Block a 20-minute Sunday planning session in your calendar for every week of Year 1 and Year 2.
31. Send an email to your EE supervisor this week — even if your topic isn't finalised — to begin the conversation.
32. Open your CAS platform (ManageBac or equivalent) and log your first CAS activity with a genuine reflective journal entry.
33. Find or purchase one TOK text (van de Lagemaat's 'Theory of Knowledge' is widely recommended) and read the first chapter.

Final Thought

The students who perform best in the IB are rarely those who never struggle — they are those who treat every challenge as data. Every failed practice essay, every confusing EE chapter, every TOK question that stumps you is not evidence that you cannot do this. It is evidence that you are doing it. Keep going.

Good luck — and remember: the IB is not something that happens to you. It is something you build, one thoughtful action at a time.