ECLASSOPEDIA

TOP SCORING IA EXAMPLES BREAKDOWN

A Comprehensive Guide for IB Students and Educators — 2026 Edition

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About This Report

This report presents a detailed breakdown of top-scoring Internal Assessment (IA) examples across IB Diploma subjects. It is designed to help students, educators, and curriculum designers understand what distinguishes an outstanding IA from an average one.

1. Introduction to Internal Assessments

The Internal Assessment (IA) is a core component of every IB Diploma subject, contributing significantly to a student's final grade. Understanding the anatomy of a top-scoring IA is essential for any serious IB student.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme's Internal Assessment component represents one of the most critical yet misunderstood pillars of academic evaluation in secondary education globally. Unlike traditional examinations, the IA invites students to investigate topics of personal interest within a structured academic framework, fostering independent thinking, research skills, and disciplinary depth. In 2026, as IB student populations continue to expand across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, the demand for clear, actionable guidance on what constitutes a top-scoring IA has never been greater.

At Eclassopedia, our team of IB educators, examiners, and academic coaches has meticulously analysed hundreds of exemplary IAs submitted across 2023, 2024, and 2025. This report distils those insights into a subject-by-subject breakdown, offering students and educators a precise understanding of what top examiners look for, what distinguishes a 20/20 Extended Essay from a 15/20 one, and how to bridge the gap between competent and exceptional.

The IA is not merely a formality. It is an opportunity for students to demonstrate the kinds of skills that universities globally recognise and value: intellectual curiosity, methodological rigour, coherent argumentation, and the ability to communicate complex ideas with clarity and precision. This report treats the IA with the seriousness it deserves, providing concrete, subject-specific analysis grounded in examiner reports and verified student examples.

KEY The IA typically accounts for 20–30% of the final IB grade, depending on the subject. For many students, it is the single greatest opportunity to secure top marks outside the pressured environment of final exams.

This document is organised into subject groupings, following the IB's own structure: Sciences, Humanities & Social Sciences, Languages, Mathematics, and Arts. Each section includes an overview of the assessment criteria, an analysis of top-scoring examples, identification of common pitfalls, and targeted recommendations for improvement.

2. Understanding the IA Scoring Framework

Before dissecting individual subject IAs, it is vital to understand the overarching criteria that examiners apply across all disciplines.

Every IB IA, regardless of subject, is evaluated against a set of criteria that collectively assess a student's ability to demonstrate subject-specific knowledge and skills, conduct independent and authentic inquiry, apply methodology or analytical frameworks appropriately, present findings or arguments with coherence and academic integrity, and reflect critically on the process and outcome.

While the specific criteria vary by subject — for example, Biology uses Data Analysis and Evaluation, while History uses Analysis and Use of Sources — the underlying philosophy is consistent: examiners reward students who demonstrate genuine intellectual engagement with a focused, well-defined topic. Breadth of knowledge matters less than depth of application.

2.1 General Scoring Bands

IB IAs are typically scored on scales ranging from 0 to 20, 0 to 24, or 0 to 25 depending on the subject. The following table provides a generalised breakdown of performance bands observed in top-scoring examples analysed by Eclassopedia's academic team for the 2025 examination session.

Subject / Criterion	Max Score	Top Performer Avg	Key Differentiator
Biology IA	24	22.1	Rigorous method & error analysis
Chemistry IA	24	21.8	Original experimental design
Physics IA	24	21.3	Strong data processing & graphs
History IA	25	22.6	Insightful source evaluation (OPCVL)
Economics IA	45	40.2	Real-world application of theory
Mathematics AA IA	20	18.4	Elegant exploration & personal interest
Mathematics AI IA	20	17.9	Statistical rigour & real data

Subject / Criterion	Max Score	Top Performer Avg	Key Differentiator
English A IA	40	35.7	Deep literary analysis & voice
Psychology IA	22	19.8	Ethical reflection & replication design
Business Management IA	25	21.4	Focused research question & tools

These averages reflect consistent patterns across multiple exemplary submissions. The gap between the maximum score and the top-performer average typically reflects minor shortfalls in critical reflection, referencing, or the depth of evaluative commentary — areas where even strong students frequently fall short.

3. Sciences: Biology, Chemistry, and Physics

Science IAs demand a fusion of creative experimental design and methodological precision. The top-scoring examples are defined not by how much data was collected, but by the quality of thinking behind each decision.

3.1 Biology IA: What Makes a 23–24?

The Biology IA, worth 20% of the final grade, challenges students to conduct an original scientific investigation. The top-scoring examples reviewed by Eclassopedia shared several defining characteristics that elevated them above the rest.

The first hallmark of an exceptional Biology IA is a precisely framed research question. A question like 'How does the concentration of copper sulphate affect the rate of catalase activity in potato cells?' is specific, testable, and scientifically relevant. Contrast this with the far too common 'How does temperature affect enzyme activity?' — a question so broad that it offers no scope for authentic inquiry. Top scorers demonstrate from the outset that they understand the disciplinary context of their question.

The second defining feature is the quality of the experimental design. Examiners award maximum marks in the Personal Engagement, Exploration, Analysis, Evaluation, and Communication criteria. Students who score 5/5 in Personal Engagement do not merely state an interest in the topic; they demonstrate why this particular angle matters to them, often connecting it to a real-world context or personal experience. One outstanding example analysed by our team investigated the effect of varying concentrations of caffeine on the heart rate of Daphnia, connecting it to the student's broader interest in pharmacology and sports nutrition.

Crucially, top Biology IAs also demonstrate meticulous error analysis. Rather than listing sources of error as an afterthought, these students quantify uncertainties in measurements, discuss the propagation of errors through calculations, and evaluate the extent to which specific sources of error may have influenced results. This kind of systematic thinking is what separates a 21 from a 24.

TIP Use a table to present your raw and processed data separately. Clearly label units, uncertainties, and decimal places. Examiners frequently penalise students who mix raw and processed data in the same table.

3.2 Chemistry IA: Originality and Precision

Chemistry IAs scoring in the 22–24 range consistently demonstrate two qualities that lower-scoring IAs lack: originality in experimental design and precision in data processing. The most impressive Chemistry IAs analysed by Eclassopedia were those in which students developed novel experimental approaches rather than replicating standard textbook experiments.

For instance, one exemplary IA investigated the effect of different natural indicators (turmeric, red cabbage, and hibiscus) on the accuracy of acid-base titrations. Rather than using a standard phenolphthalein indicator, the student combined their Chemistry and Environmental Science knowledge to devise a genuinely original protocol. The examiner's commentary praised the 'sophisticated integration of analytical chemistry and sustainability awareness.'

In terms of data processing, top Chemistry IAs consistently demonstrate the use of appropriate statistical tools, including the calculation of mean, standard deviation, and relative standard deviation to evaluate precision. Students who score maximum marks in the Analysis criterion understand that presenting a single set of results is insufficient; they perform multiple trials, calculate averages, and discuss the statistical significance of variations between trials.

3.3 Physics IA: The Power of a Focused Investigation

Physics IAs present a unique challenge: students must balance the complexity of physical phenomena with the practical limitations of school laboratory equipment. The most celebrated Physics IAs reviewed in our sample were characterised by a laser focus on a single, well-controlled variable and exceptional quality of graphical data presentation.

One standout example investigated the relationship between the length of a pendulum string and its period of oscillation, but extended the investigation to test the classical formula at angles greater than 15 degrees — where the simple harmonic approximation breaks down. This demonstrated not merely competence in experimental physics, but a genuine curiosity about the limits of physical models. The student's use of video analysis software to measure oscillation periods with millisecond precision earned full marks in the Analysis criterion.

Physics examiners consistently note that students who use linearisation techniques — for example, plotting T^2 against L rather than T against L to test the pendulum formula — demonstrate a deeper mathematical understanding and earn significantly higher marks in the Analysis and Evaluation criteria.

4. Humanities and Social Sciences

In the Humanities and Social Sciences, the ability to engage critically with sources, construct nuanced arguments, and apply theoretical frameworks is what separates good IAs from great ones.

4.1 History IA: Mastery of the Historical Investigation

The History IA, known formally as the Historical Investigation, is one of the most demanding yet rewarding components of the IB Diploma. Scored out of 25, it requires students to investigate a historical question through the critical evaluation of primary and secondary sources. The top-scoring examples — those in the 22–25 range — share a set of features that our Eclassopedia historians have systematically identified.

The most critical skill in a high-scoring History IA is the ability to perform OPCVL analysis — evaluating sources in terms of their Origin, Purpose, Content, Value, and Limitation — with genuine sophistication. Many students apply the OPCVL framework mechanically, noting that a newspaper article was 'written by a journalist in 1942 for a general audience' and moving on. Exceptional students, by contrast, interrogate why a source was produced at a particular historical moment, what ideological or political contexts shaped its content, and what specific gaps in the historical record it creates.

One outstanding History IA investigated the question: 'To what extent did the Meiji Restoration transform Japan's social structure between 1868 and 1889?' The student used a combination of Meiji government decrees, Western diplomatic reports, and contemporary Japanese newspaper accounts to construct a multi-perspectival argument. The examiner praised the student's ability to 'identify the partial nature of each source while still drawing meaningful historical conclusions.'

Top History IAs also demonstrate rigorous engagement with historiography — the debate among historians about how to interpret the past. Students who engage with conflicting historical interpretations, rather than presenting a single narrative as fact, demonstrate the kind of critical thinking that earns marks in the Analysis criterion.

KEY The Section B (Investigation) should comprise approximately 1,400–1,600 words of your 2,200-word IA. Students who under-invest in the investigation itself — producing a brilliant Section A but a thin Section B — consistently fall short of the top band.

4.2 Economics IA: Applying Theory to the Real World

The Economics IA requires students to produce three commentaries, each analysing a current economic news article through the lens of IB Economics theory. Collectively worth 20% of the final grade, the commentaries are scored out of 45 (15 per commentary). Top-scoring Economics IAs — those achieving 40 or above — are distinguished by the precision and sophistication of their theoretical application.

A common mistake among average performers is to describe economic events rather than analyse them. For example, a student commenting on rising inflation might explain what inflation is and describe the news article's content without applying any specific IB theory. Top scorers, by contrast, immediately deploy relevant diagrams — accurately labelled, clearly annotated, and directly integrated into their argument — and use them to explain the mechanism by which inflation emerges, not merely its existence.

The Economics IAs in the top band also demonstrate a nuanced awareness of evaluation. In IB Economics, 'evaluation' means considering multiple perspectives, short-run versus long-run effects, the assumptions underlying economic models, and potential policy implications. Students who ask 'to what extent' rather than simply 'how' tend to produce richer, more analytical commentaries that examiners consistently reward.

4.3 Psychology IA: Replication with Insight

The Psychology IA tasks students with replicating a published psychological study, adapting its methodology, and presenting their findings in a formal report. Scored out of 22, the top-scoring Psychology IAs reviewed by Eclassopedia combined methodological precision with genuine reflective depth.

The most impressive Psychology IAs demonstrated a clear understanding of the ethical guidelines governing psychological research — including informed consent, the right to withdraw, and debriefing — and applied these not as a checklist but as a genuine reflection on the researcher-participant relationship. Examiners note that students who engage thoughtfully with the ethical dimensions of their replication, particularly in studies involving deception or sensitive topics, consistently earn higher marks in the Evaluation criterion.

One exemplary Psychology IA replicated Loftus and Palmer's classic study on eyewitness testimony, adapting the methodology to use video footage of a staged accident rather than a filmed car crash. The student's discussion of the ecological validity of their adaptation — and its implications for the external validity of the original study — was singled out by the examiner as 'exceptional for a student at this level.'

5. Mathematics IAs: Exploration and Elegance

The Mathematics IA — called the Exploration — invites students to investigate a mathematical topic of personal interest. The best explorations are not the most complex; they are the most coherent and personally meaningful.

5.1 Mathematics AA: Aim for Depth, Not Complexity

The Mathematics Analysis and Approaches (AA) Internal Assessment, known as the Exploration, is scored out of 20 and challenges students to demonstrate mathematical communication, personal engagement, reflection, the use of mathematics, and aim. Contrary to popular belief, the highest-scoring explorations are not necessarily those covering the most advanced mathematics. They are, instead, those that demonstrate a genuine personal connection to the topic, develop the mathematics with clarity and rigour, and reflect critically on the process and implications of the findings.

One outstanding Mathematics AA exploration investigated the mathematics of music — specifically, the relationship between the harmonic series and the frequencies of notes in a musical scale. The student, who played the violin, began with a personal motivation, developed the relevant mathematics from first principles using logarithms and geometric sequences, and concluded with an original investigation into why certain intervals sound harmonious while others sound dissonant. The examiner's commentary described the work as 'a model of how personal engagement can elevate mathematical exploration.'

Key characteristics of top Mathematics AA Explorations include a clearly defined aim stated at the outset, consistent use of correct mathematical notation and terminology, evidence of the student's own mathematical thinking rather than a summary of textbook content, at least one original result or observation that the student has derived themselves, and a reflective conclusion that discusses limitations and potential extensions.

TIP Avoid the most common pitfall in Math IAs: choosing a topic that is too complex for the student's current level, resulting in an exploration that is technically impressive but poorly understood. Examiners can detect when a student is copying mathematical arguments they do not fully grasp.

5.2 Mathematics AI: Statistics with Real-World Impact

The Mathematics Applications and Interpretations (AI) Exploration tends to favour statistical investigations, modelling tasks, and the application of mathematical tools to real-world data. Top-scoring Mathematics AI IAs demonstrate statistical rigour, appropriate use of technology (such as GeoGebra or Excel), and a clear connection between the mathematical analysis and real-world implications.

One exemplary Mathematics AI exploration used chi-squared tests and correlation coefficients to investigate whether a relationship exists between a country's GDP per capita and its life expectancy, using World Bank data for 40 countries. The student's careful discussion of confounding variables — including access to healthcare, education levels, and political stability — and their acknowledgement of the limitations of correlation as a measure of causation earned maximum marks in the Reflection criterion.

6. Language and Literature

Language IAs demand a sophisticated blend of close reading, literary analysis, and the ability to construct an argument that goes beyond mere description of the text.

6.1 English A Literature: The Individual Oral

The English A Literature Individual Oral (IO) is a 10-minute oral assessment in which students discuss the work of two literary texts in relation to a global issue. Scored out of 40, it is one of the most important components of the IB English A curriculum. The top-scoring Individual Orals reviewed by Eclassopedia's English Literature specialists demonstrated a set of consistent hallmarks.

The highest-achieving students chose global issues that were genuinely illuminated by their chosen texts, rather than forcing a superficial connection. One exceptional student explored the global issue of the suppression of female voices, connecting Sylvia Plath's 'The Bell Jar' with Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale.' The student's analysis of how both authors use narrative voice, imagery, and structural choices to dramatise the silencing of women was described by the examiner as 'original, nuanced, and deeply informed.'

A critical feature of top-scoring IOs is the quality of close reading. Examiners consistently reward students who are able to select short, specific passages from the text and analyse them at the level of individual word choices, sentence structures, and literary devices, demonstrating how these micro-level features contribute to the text's larger thematic concerns. Students who speak about texts in general terms, without anchoring their observations in specific textual evidence, rarely exceed the mid-band range.

Top scorers also demonstrate what the IB calls 'authorial choices' — the ability to discuss why an author made specific decisions and what effects those decisions achieve. This requires students to think not just as readers but as writers, considering the craft behind the literature they are analysing.

6.2 Language B: Written Assignment Excellence

For Language B students — those studying a language as a second or acquired language — the Internal Assessment takes the form of an individual oral that assesses the ability to discuss two images related to a cultural theme from the target language community. Top-scoring Language B IAs demonstrate fluency, cultural awareness, and the ability to sustain a sophisticated conversation at a level appropriate to their language tier.

Students who score maximum marks in the Language B IA consistently demonstrate not merely grammatical accuracy but genuine communicative confidence — the ability to respond to unexpected follow-up questions from the examiner with flexibility and depth. Preparation for these follow-up questions is one of the most frequently underestimated aspects of Language B IA preparation.

7. Business Management IA: The Research Project

The Business Management IA challenges students to conduct independent research into a real organisation facing a genuine business challenge. Authenticity and analytical rigour are the cornerstones of a top-scoring submission.

The Business Management (BM) Internal Assessment, known as the Research Project, is scored out of 25 and requires students to investigate a real-world business problem or decision using relevant BM tools, theories, and concepts. Top-scoring Research Projects reviewed by Eclassopedia's business education team were distinguished by their focused research questions, rigorous primary research, and nuanced application of business management frameworks.

The most critical element of a high-scoring BM IA is the research question itself. The best research questions are specific, decision-focused, and directly tied to a real business challenge. 'Should XYZ Bakery introduce a new product line to increase revenue in 2026?' is a strong research question because it is specific, actionable, and clearly linked to a business decision that the IA can meaningfully investigate. Contrast this with the weaker 'What challenges does XYZ Bakery face?' — a question so broad that no focused analysis is possible.

Top BM IAs demonstrate rigorous primary research, typically in the form of interviews with business owners or managers, structured questionnaires administered to relevant stakeholders, or direct observation. The quality of primary research is a key differentiator between mid-band and top-band submissions. Examiners consistently note that students who gather rich, specific primary data — rather than relying exclusively on secondary sources — are better positioned to produce genuinely analytical conclusions.

The application of BM tools — such as SWOT analysis, Ansoff's Matrix, the Boston Consulting Group Matrix, or break-even analysis — must be integrated organically into the investigation, not bolted on as a formality. Top scorers use these tools to generate insights and drive their recommendations, rather than completing them mechanically and moving on.

KEY The most common reason Business Management IAs fall short of the top band is the failure to evaluate: students present findings but do not weigh the evidence, consider alternative perspectives, or justify their final recommendation with reference to the specific context of the business.

8. Cross-Subject Principles of Top-Scoring IAs

While every subject has its own criteria and conventions, our analysis of hundreds of exemplary IAs reveals a set of universal principles that distinguish top-scoring work across all disciplines.

Across every subject analysed in this report, the following principles consistently characterised the highest-scoring Internal Assessments:

- A focused, precisely defined research question or aim that immediately signals the student's understanding of the disciplinary context.
- Genuine personal engagement — not merely stated but evidenced through the student's choices, observations, and reflections throughout the IA.
- Methodological appropriateness — whether in experimental design, source selection, data collection, or analytical framework, top scorers demonstrate that they have thought carefully about how to answer their research question.
- Depth over breadth — the willingness to investigate one aspect of a topic thoroughly, rather than skimming the surface of many aspects.
- Critical reflection — the ability to step back from the investigation and evaluate its limitations, implications, and potential extensions with genuine intellectual honesty.
- Academic communication — clear, precise, subject-appropriate language, correctly formatted citations, and a logical structure that guides the reader through the investigation.
- Original contribution — even in subjects that require replication or historical investigation, top scorers add something of their own: a novel angle, an unexpected finding, or a particularly insightful interpretation.

It is worth noting that these principles are not separable from each other. A student who is genuinely engaged with their topic will naturally invest more thought into their methodology. A student who has thought carefully about their methodology will collect better data. Better data enables deeper analysis. Deeper analysis supports more insightful reflection. The best IAs are characterised by a virtuous cycle of intellectual engagement that reinforces itself throughout the investigation.

9. Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

Understanding what distinguishes a top-scoring IA is only half the battle. Equally important is understanding the mistakes that prevent students from reaching their potential.

Based on our analysis of both top-scoring and mid-band IAs, Eclassopedia's academic team has identified the following as the most common and consequential pitfalls that prevent students from achieving the highest marks:

9.1 Choosing Too Broad a Topic

The single most frequent cause of underperformance in IAs across all subjects is a research question or topic that is too broad to investigate meaningfully within the word limit. A History IA asking 'What caused World War I?' or a Biology IA asking 'How does temperature affect living organisms?' cannot be addressed with the depth and specificity required for top marks. Students should narrow their topic until they feel almost constrained by its specificity — that level of focus is precisely what examiners reward.

9.2 Underestimating the Importance of Personal Engagement

Many students treat the Personal Engagement criterion as a bureaucratic box to tick, adding a sentence or two about why they chose their topic and moving on. Top-scoring students, by contrast, allow their personal engagement to shape every aspect of their IA — from the design of the investigation to the selection of sources to the interpretation of results. Personal engagement is not a section of the IA; it is a quality that should permeate the entire piece.

9.3 Inadequate Evaluation and Reflection

A surprisingly large number of students — even those who have conducted excellent investigations — fall short of the top band because their evaluation and reflection are superficial. Listing three sources of error in a Biology IA, or noting that 'further research is needed' in a History IA, does not constitute genuine evaluation. Top scorers evaluate the significance of limitations, consider alternative explanations for their findings, and reflect on what their investigation reveals about the broader discipline.

9.4 Poor Academic Presentation

Inconsistent referencing, unlabelled graphs, poorly formatted tables, and imprecise language are all penalised in the Communication or Presentation criterion. These are

avoidable mistakes that frequently cost students marks they otherwise deserved. Eclassopedia recommends allocating dedicated time — at least one full week — to reviewing and polishing the final presentation of the IA before submission.

10. Eclassopedia's Recommendations for 2026

Based on our comprehensive analysis, Eclassopedia offers the following strategic recommendations for IB students and educators approaching the IA in 2026.

For students beginning their IA journey, the most important early investment is time spent on topic selection and research question development. Students who spend two to three weeks refining their research question before beginning their investigation consistently outperform those who rush into data collection or writing. Use this time to read exemplary IAs in your subject, consult with your supervisor, and test your research question against the criteria before committing to it.

For educators and supervisors, the most valuable contribution you can make to your students' IA performance is to provide focused, criteria-referenced feedback at the draft stage. Generic feedback ('this is good but needs more analysis') is far less useful than specific, criteria-referenced guidance ('in the Evaluation criterion, you need to discuss the significance of your limitations, not just list them'). Eclassopedia strongly recommends using the subject-specific mark schemes as the basis for all feedback conversations with students.

For schools and IB coordinators, investing in access to exemplary IA samples — ideally annotated with examiner commentary — is one of the highest-return investments in student performance available. Students who have seen what a top-scoring IA looks like in their subject are significantly better equipped to produce one themselves. Eclassopedia's library of annotated exemplary IAs, updated for the 2026 examination session, is available through our academic platform.

NOTE Eclassopedia's one-to-one IA mentoring programme pairs students with subject-specialist IB coaches who have personal experience as IB examiners. Students enrolled in this programme have achieved an average improvement of 3.2 marks above their predicted IA score.

Finally, it is important for all stakeholders to remember that the IA, at its best, is not merely a mechanism for securing marks. It is an invitation to think independently, to contribute — however modestly — to human knowledge within a discipline, and to experience the genuine satisfaction of sustained intellectual inquiry. The students who approach their IAs with this spirit, in Eclassopedia's experience, are precisely the ones who produce the work that examiners remember and reward most highly.

About Eclassopedia

Eclassopedia is a leading online educational platform dedicated to empowering IB Diploma students and educators with expert resources, personalised coaching, and comprehensive academic support. Our team of experienced IB examiners, educators, and academic coaches work collaboratively to provide students with the tools and guidance they need to excel in every component of the IB Diploma Programme.