

## Individuals and societies

**Note:** Before reading the following guidance, read the “Generic guidance for the extended essay” section in this guide.

### What is distinctive about an extended essay in individuals and societies?

An extended essay in the individuals and societies subjects explores a question that connects to human experience and behaviour across time and space. If you are interested in developing a critical understanding of the complexities of our social world and who we are as humans, an extended essay in individuals and societies will be a very rewarding choice.

The subjects in this group include business management, digital society, economics, geography, global politics, history, philosophy, psychology, social and cultural anthropology and world religions. These disciplines approach questions about the individual and collective dimensions of existence from multiple perspectives, providing different concepts, contexts, theories and methods for the study and understanding of a complex world filled with difference and variation.

Writing an extended essay in individuals and societies will give you the opportunity to:

- challenge cultural assumptions or contest definitions and descriptions of the social world or assumptions about human nature
- develop, through an in-depth study, a critical inquiry into the human condition and its possibilities
- increase your knowledge of a subject within individuals and societies by exploring relevant subject literature
- select different theories and/or concepts in individuals and societies subjects, then apply suitable methodologies to formulate an argument
- develop a more informed and less naive understanding of the dynamics of the social world.

### Choosing a topic

Individuals and societies subjects naturally lend themselves to a wide variety of potential topics for the extended essay. The subjects in this group can tackle many big questions about our shared present, past and future. Topics could revolve around real-world issues such as the environmental and climatic crisis, the future of global capitalism, migration, governance in a digital age, and so many others. The big issues related to human experience and social life can be posed as well-focused questions that explore these issues within these disciplines’ perspectives.

The choice of a topic in individuals and societies could result from your own personal life experience, from issues of contemporary debate. Or it could be an extension of a topic covered in one of your favourite subjects, or even a topic related to but not covered by your favourite subject.

Your topic needs to be considered in terms of one of the subjects in individuals and societies. Although, often, a topic could be approached from more than one individuals and societies subject and from many different perspectives. For example, if your interest is in sport, your topic could be researched and written as an essay in different, distinct subjects.

| Subject             | Approach  |
|---------------------|---|
| Global politics     | Explore global discourses around women in sports and how these influence political decisions about gender rights. |
| Business management | Analyse a case study involving a brand sponsoring a football club.  |

What makes these topics effectively grounded in one of these diverse subjects is the way in which they are approached. It is not a matter of a given content but rather the concepts, methods and perhaps theories relevant to the subject that will provide insights and will allow you to develop well-constructed arguments.

## Researching and writing the essay

In general, most DP extended essay subjects require the use of primary research sources, in addition to mandatory secondary sources. However, this is not always the case.

- **Social and cultural anthropology:** The IA is based on primary sources, including fieldwork. But for the extended essay, it is only permitted to use primary sources as a supplement to secondary data and sources: the extended essay must be based on existing ethnographic material(s).
- **Psychology:** An extended essay must be based on secondary sources only. The collection of primary data is not permitted.

The subjects in the individuals and societies group are varied and diverse. As a consequence, your knowledge of the discipline's approaches and perspectives is very important when researching and writing your extended essay.

Although all extended essays must include secondary research (literature review), different subjects will require different types of sources from which to gather information and construct your line of argument. It is important that you understand what constitutes an appropriate primary or secondary source in your subject of choice, as well as which methods are suitable. For example, in history, primary sources convey first-hand experience of the event or time period you are studying, while secondary sources interpret and analyse primary sources.

You must consider what an extended essay in your subject requires in terms of sources and methods because this is not the same in all subjects. For example, in world religions, the *Bhagavad Gita* sacred text is a primary source that can be analysed in depth in view of a chosen theoretical framework as a strategy to follow. In psychology, on the other hand, the extended essay is a review of literature; that is, an analysis of peer-reviewed research. The approach here is based on secondary sources only. In other subjects, such as global politics or social and cultural anthropology, relevant academic secondary sources will substantiate your line of argument, which may or may not be supplemented with primary data collected through appropriate methods.

Comparisons, case studies, discourse analysis, critical analysis of a theory or concept and in-depth analysis of a primary source are all possible research strategies through which you may construct a line of argument within individuals and societies. In a successful essay, this line of argument sticks to the logic of the discipline, uses specific terminology and follows disciplinary style and structural conventions. It is important that you seek advice from your supervisor and refer to the subject guide for the subject you have chosen to make sure you are making appropriate use of sources, methods, approaches and research strategies.

## Example topics, research questions and approaches

| Subject                    | Topic and research question   | Outline of approach  |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Business management</b> | <p><b>Topic:</b> How McDonald's trains its managers in the USA: The Hamburger University in Chicago</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> To what extent is McDonald's Hamburger University an optimal form of training?</p> | <p>The in-house training courses offered by McDonald's are described and evaluated, using secondary sources, supported by the findings from primary research. Primary research: interviews with trainers who work at Hamburger University and surveys of graduates from that school.</p> |

| Subject                | Topic and research question   | Outline of approach  |
|------------------------|---|--|
|                        | <p><b>Topic:</b> McDonald's charitable work: Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC)</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> Who benefits more from the relationship: RMHC or McDonald's?</p>   | <p>Many academic articles have recently been published about RMHC, both to praise the charity but also to criticize the fact that donations could be more substantial. Using secondary data only, this extended essay discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the relationship between McDonald's and RMHC.</p>  |
| <b>Digital society</b> | <p><b>Topic:</b> Democracy in an age of misinformation</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> How has the increase in information shared on social media challenged democratic institutions? The case of Cambridge Analytica.</p>   | <p>Case study: Cambridge Analytica</p> <p>Research: Secondary sources such as podcasts, television or internet documentaries, books, news articles.</p> <p>Possible sources: Publications by Cambridge Analytica and talks given by its executives; Mark Zuckerberg's testimonies before Congress; examples of Facebook ads published during the scandal.</p> <p>Analysis: Explore the impacts on the essential components of democracy.</p>   |
|                        | <p><b>Topic:</b> The transformation of factory work by automation</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> To what extent has factory work been transformed by automation in the last decade? To what extent can productive work cultures be maintained with robo-colleagues?</p> | <p>Research trends in factory automation, contextualization in specific factories.</p> <p>Select a case study to focus on, e.g. the use of drones to make deliveries for a certain company.</p> <p>Consider the relevant stakeholders to the transformation, such as employees, managers, consumers, tech providers.</p> <p>Use secondary sources to examine existing coverage of the case study or similar studies. Evaluate their methodologies to see if they could be adapted for your essay's purposes.</p> <p>Research the impacts: Use primary sources such as trends in financial statement over time at a specific company (before, during and after the implementation of factory automation), interviews with employees or shadowing a worker).</p> |

| Subject          | Topic and research question   | Outline of approach  |
|------------------|---|--|
|                  |   | Discuss the impacts on the key stakeholders to arrive at an answer to the research question.   |
| <b>Economics</b> | <p><b>Topic:</b> Minimum wage theory</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> Does current economic research into minimum wage invalidate the neoclassical argument that increasing the minimum wage will lead to increased levels of unemployment?</p> | <p>Neoclassical economics argues that increases in the minimum wage will lead to higher levels of unemployment. However, new research and new economic thinking argues that this is not the case and it was based on flawed assumptions.</p> <p>The neoclassical argument is researched and presented. The counterarguments are researched and evaluated in terms of the nature of the evidence and studies that have been carried out.</p> <p>This essay can use recent evidence from news articles or data banks to assess the link between minimum wages and unemployment in different places.</p> <p>Throughout the essay, conclusions to independent points of analysis help build the argument and identify how valid the neoclassical model is.</p> |
|                  | <p><b>Topic:</b> The role of mobile banking in economic development</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> How has increased access to mobile banking contributed to economic development in town (or village) "X" since 2010?</p>                    | <p>This essay carries out primary research on the ways mobile banking can contribute to economic development, in theory.</p> <p>The research includes data obtained by others through randomized control trials. It focuses on relevant aspects of development: higher incomes, improved health outcomes, improved education outcomes, empowerment of women, increased civic participation.</p> <p>Primary research leads to an evaluation of the extent to which economic development has occurred in the area investigated.</p>  |
| <b>Geography</b> | <p><b>Topic:</b> Mangrove zonation</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> What are the most important factors that contribute to the biodiversity of mangroves in Singapore?</p>  | Using a mangrove zonation model, primary data is collected on variables such as species, coverage, height, soil pH and infiltration rates.   |

| Subject                | Topic and research question   | Outline of approach  |
|------------------------|---|--|
|                        | <p><b>Topic:</b> An investigation of the correlation between gender equality and socioeconomic development in the different neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> To what extent does socioeconomic development affect gender equality in the neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro?</p> | <p>This is then mapped along several points on the coast of Singapore to determine whether the patterns match the model.</p> <p>Census data, figures from the Human Development Index (HDI) and other socioeconomic indicators are collected.</p> <p>A “Gender Index” is developed based on similar pre-existing indices.</p> <p>To test correlations, a geographic information system (GIS) is used to map the resulting patterns, graphs and statistics.</p> |
| <b>Global politics</b> | <p><b>Topic:</b> Women, power and conflict</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> To what extent is female leadership better at facing conflict? Responses to terrorist attacks in New Zealand and France.</p>  | <p>Literature review of concepts of power, conflict, terrorism, leadership, feminism in politics and soft power.</p> <p>Analysis of cases of terrorist attacks and responses in both countries during Jacinda Ardern’s and Emmanuel Macron’s tenures as Prime Minister of New Zealand and President of France, respectively.</p> <p>Evaluation of the situations, reaching a conclusion that links facts with theories.</p>                                    |
|                        | <p><b>Topic:</b> Big data, apps and human rights</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> To what extent is the large amount of personal data collected by mobile apps a breach of the right to privacy? The case of Snapchat in the European Union (EU).</p>   | <p>A review of the literature on the concepts of big data, human rights, universalism, interdependence, indivisibility, the right to privacy, and data protection.</p> <p>Analysis of the personal data needed for downloading and using the app. Analysis of the privacy policy.</p> <p>Facts are linked with the key concepts to develop an argument and conclusion, answering the research question.</p>  |
| <b>History</b>         | <p><b>Topic:</b> The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> To what extent was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 caused by</p>  | <p>This question provides a narrow focus to an otherwise overly broad topic. The key policies to be discussed would be the changes to the Soviet Union’s constitution in 1988, and the impact these had</p>  |

| Subject           | Topic and research question  | Outline of approach   |
|-------------------|--|---|
|                   | the political reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev?  | <p>on the political structure of the state: allowing, eventually, for greater openness and a measure of democracy.</p> <p>Other factors that may also be considered as contributing to the collapse of the Soviet Union are the discontent resulting from the failure of economic policies, the failure to win the war in Afghanistan, the “loss” of the Baltic states, and the growth of nationalism, perhaps most significantly in Russia.</p>  |
|                   | <p><b>Topic:</b> The women’s suffrage movement in New Zealand</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> What was the significance of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in gaining the vote for women in New Zealand?</p>    | <p>In 1893, New Zealand was the first country to grant all women citizens the right to vote.</p> <p>One approach to this question could be to consider the importance of the WCTU in two senses. First, galvanizing women to get involved in politics to achieve the moral improvement of society. Second and following on from this, to agitate for suffrage.</p> <p>Other factors such as the support of the Liberal Party and the increasing number of professional women with an education were also important.</p>         |
| <b>Philosophy</b> | <p><b>Topic:</b> Art and nature in H.-G. Gadamer’s essay “The Speechless Image”</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> To what extent is art a reflection of nature in relation to H.-G. Gadamer’s essay “The Speechless Image”?</p> | <p>The theoretical frame of the research question could be: phenomenology and Gadamer’s hermeneutical approach, focused on our experience of art.</p> <p>Identification and presentation of relevant theses in the primary source, “The Speechless Image”.</p> <p>Discussion would include comparing and contrasting Gadamer’s approach with Kant’s writings on art and nature, and critiques of Gadamer’s work from secondary sources.</p> <p>Evaluation would consider the extent to which art is a reflection of nature.</p> |
|                   | <b>Topic:</b> The Marxist theory of alienation   | The frame of the research question is social philosophy.  |

| Subject                                 | Topic and research question  | Outline of approach   |
|---|--|---|
|   | <p><b>Research question:</b> To what extent is the Marxist theory of alienation in <i>Economics and Philosophy Manuscript of 1844</i> a sublation of Feuerbach's alienation theory?</p>  | <p>Presenting the theory of alienation in the primary source by Marx, and Feuerbach's position. Using secondary sources.</p> <p>Discussion of the relationship between Marx and Feuerbach on the issue. Justification of the answer given to the research question.</p>   |
| <b>Psychology</b>                       | <p><b>Topic:</b> The struggles of a "perfect" athlete</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> Does being a perfectionist have a detrimental effect on performance in team sports?</p>   | <p>Sporting performance is operationalized (giving an abstract idea a measurable set of criteria, which can be researched), and a single sport is investigated. This definition must be consistently applied throughout the essay.</p> <p>Evidence is provided to both support and challenge the idea that perfectionism may have a detrimental effect on performance.</p>  |
|   | <p><b>Topic:</b> The effectiveness of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and mindfulness in stress management</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> Is mindfulness or CBT a more effective means of coping with stress?</p>  | <p>Although it is important to outline the key assumptions made by each of these two approaches to treatment, this should not be a significant part of the essay.</p> <p>The research should compare evaluated published research findings supporting each type of explanation, having linked the studies to relevant psychological theory. A balanced argument could evaluate evidence claiming support for partial and final conclusions.</p> |
| <b>Social and cultural anthropology</b> | <p><b>Topic:</b> The concept of performance within anthropological theory—its interpretation and application in three contemporary ethnographies about the body</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> How useful is the concept of performance to explain bodily experiences in women's current political demonstrations from a feminist theoretical perspective?</p> | <p>This essay addresses a relevant discussion of a concept in contemporary social theory. There is an analysis of the concept by reading ethnographies and subject literature on the topic.</p> <p>The essay contextualizes the concept within specific schools of thought and discusses its application in some selected ethnographies used as comparison, and assesses its theoretical value.</p>   |

| Subject                | Topic and research question  | Outline of approach   |
|------------------------|--|---|
|                        | <p><b>Topic:</b> Influences of witchcraft on the women of the Bhil tribe in India</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> To what extent do witchcraft beliefs influence the women of the Bhil tribe?</p>   | <p>Witchcraft is critically discussed and linked to the concept of causation by exploring diverse theories, including those of Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, Claude Lévi-Strauss, postmodern approaches and feminist theory.</p> <p>The essay examines the centrality of witchcraft beliefs and practices in shaping the religious, social and economic roles of women within the tribe today.</p> <p>It does this through secondary sources, supplemented by primary research (interviews).</p> |
| <b>World religions</b> | <p><b>Topic:</b> An examination of differences between Reform Jews and Orthodox Jews regarding female ordination</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> Why are Orthodox Jews more resistant to females being ordained as pulpit rabbis than Reform Jews?</p>            | <p>A reading of Hebrew texts and Talmud that addresses the question of women’s ordination. This is carried out through the lens of feminist approaches to religion and gender.</p> <p>In-depth interviews, with a well-structured interview protocol, are used for both Reform and Orthodox respondents.</p>  |
|                        | <p><b>Topic:</b> Investigating trends in Evangelical conceptions of Christian eschatology</p> <p><b>Research question:</b> To what extent can Evangelical conceptions of Christian eschatology result in internal inconsistencies within Evangelical theology?</p> | <p>Through a theological inquiry, the research will probe divergent opinions on some sub-events in Christian eschatology, such as death, Parousia, resurrection, judgement and the rapture.</p>   |

## Considering the assessment criteria

Make sure you use the extended essay assessment criteria to remind yourself of the expected elements of the extended essay. Each of the five criteria (A–E) is accompanied by a guiding question that should be applied to the context of individuals and societies. In this way, you can see how the assessment criteria relate to your own essay. It is important that you also refer to the “[Generic guidance for the extended essay](#)” section in this guide for a broader spectrum of advice on using the assessment criteria to inform your writing.

|                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <b>A: Framework for the essay</b> | <p>Make sure your focused research question and research methods clearly align with the individuals and societies subject you are using. It may be a good idea to refer to the subject guide for that subject to confirm that you understand the nature of the subject and its methodology—you are investigating your topic through the lens of your chosen individuals and societies subject.</p> |
|-----------------------------------|--|

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | Structural conventions relating to individuals and societies subjects include: clearly labelling diagrams, maps (that have all the required elements, such as scale and a key/legend), images and graphs, acknowledging if these are the work of others, and actively referring to them in the body of your essay; appropriate use of headings to organize your essay where appropriate.   |
| <b>B: Knowledge and understanding</b>   | <p>Each individuals and societies subject will have its own terminology, technical words and other special words or phrases that are used in that subject. Using this terminology identifies you as someone who understands the nature of the subject, e.g. “supply and demand” in economics or “digital systems” in digital society.</p> <p>Using important concepts in the subject in a meaningful and explanatory way in your writing demonstrates your knowledge and understanding. Application of key concepts in your writing is essential. For example, in a history extended essay you are likely to work the concepts “causation” and “consequence” into your essay. In social and cultural anthropology, you might apply a concept such as “marginalization” to show your understanding of a topic concerning the social exclusion of a group of people.</p> |
| <b>C: Analysis and line of argument</b> | Regardless of the individuals and societies subject you are using, when you “own” the theories, concepts and methods of that subject, and can weave your research findings towards conclusions that answer your research question, you will have produced a strong line of argument that links your analysis to the research question and the conclusion.  |
| <b>D: Discussion and evaluation</b>     | <p>Consider what a balanced discussion looks like in an essay written in your subject. Review good examples of extended essays and other academic essays in that subject, and ensure that the supporting evidence you have used is appropriate. Evaluate by weighing up the strengths and limitations of your essay.</p> <p>A balanced discussion considers different perspectives on your topic. For example, a social and cultural anthropology essay exploring elements of cultural control in the context of neocolonialism could include discussions stemming from analysing the perspectives of the different stakeholders involved.</p>   |
| <b>E: Reflection</b>                    | Refer to the “ <a href="#">Generic guidance for the extended essay</a> ” and the “ <a href="#">Reflection and the extended essay</a> ” sections of this guide.   |

## Sciences

**Note:** Before reading the following guidance, read the “[Generic guidance for the extended essay](#)” section in this guide.

### What is distinctive about an extended essay in the sciences?

An extended essay in any of the science subjects—biology, chemistry, computer science, design technology, physics, and sports, exercise and health science—offers the opportunity to investigate and collect primary or secondary data, based on a focused research question. You collect evidence using scientific methodology. Your findings must lead to a valid, evidence-based conclusion.