

Visual arts: Subject-specific guidance

See also: EE generic guide and EE Teacher support material

Overview

An extended essay (EE) in visual arts gives students an opportunity to undertake research in an area of the visual arts of particular interest to them.

The visual arts are here broadly defined also to include architecture, design and contemporary forms of visual culture.

The outcome of the research should be a coherent and structured piece of writing, with well-integrated and appropriate illustrations, and which effectively addresses a particular research question appropriate to the visual arts.

The research may be generated or inspired by the student's direct experiences of creating visual artworks, or by their interest in the work of a particular artist, style or period. This might be related to the student's own cultural context or another cultural context.

Personal contact with artists, curators and other active participants in the visual arts is encouraged, as is the use of local and primary sources.

Choice of topic

The EE topic may relate to an area of the Diploma Programme visual arts course, but students can also choose to explore other areas of the subject. Crucially, the topic must reflect their particular interest and enthusiasm within the visual arts.

Sources of ideas may include:

- the student's own art-making processes and resolved pieces
- the student's visual arts journal.

Topics to avoid

- A topic that a student can answer by summarizing general secondary sources, such as universal art history textbooks and encyclopedias.
- A topic that is likely to lead to an EE that is essentially narrative or descriptive in nature, such as one that covers many aspects of art history or particularly long periods of time.
- Biographical studies of artists—unless they address a specific research question so that the student can arrive at a particular, and preferably personal, conclusion.

Visual arts and other subjects

The topic must relate directly to the visual arts. Students may find that they need to submit their essay under another subject. For example:

- Essays on “green” architecture that focus on technology rather than esthetic considerations would be better submitted under environmental systems and societies.
- Essays about film that do not focus on the visual aspects probably belong under film studies.

Examples of topics

These examples are just for guidance. Students must ensure their choice of topic is focused (left-hand column) rather than broad (right-hand column).

✓ Focused topics	✗ Broad topics
The extent to which Grady Gerbracht’s assertion that the role of the artist is “to become the embodiment of a person, a citizen, a metaphor” is particularly embodied in interactive artworks	Installation art
The artistic significance of recent poles raised by the First Nations of Haida-Gwaii	The art of Native North American people
The extent to which the manipulation of cadavers can be considered art: an investigation of the interdependence of science, art and the representation of death in the works of Damien Hirst and Gunther von Hagens	Damien Hirst’s and Gunther von Hagens’s representation of death

Research question

Once they have chosen their topic, students must frame a focused research question.

The connection between the research question and the visual arts should be more than just incidental. Otherwise, students risk introducing material that is of marginal relevance, will confuse their inquiry and weaken their argument.

It is the task of the supervisor to ensure that the question:

- can be answered using artistic sources available to the student
- will encourage and enable the student to apply relevant art theory or concepts
- allows a systematic investigation that demonstrates critical artistic analysis and detailed understanding.

Students should be encouraged to formulate a research question of personal interest and to draw on a variety of sources to support their arguments. They should also be helped to identify and choose appropriate sources, both primary and secondary, and appropriate methods of research.

In some instances, it may become clear at an early stage in the research that too few sources are available to permit such an investigation. In such cases, students should change their focus.

Treatment of the topic

Once they have their research question, students should make a research plan. The plan should be flexible enough to allow the students to explore the topic in a creative manner. They should not be afraid to take risks throughout the research process: originality is encouraged, as is the use of a number of different research models.

It is vital that the methodology of the EE is tailored to the research question and allows for an in-depth exploration.

Many different approaches to the research question can be appropriate, for instance:

- use of primary sources (artworks and artists) and secondary sources (material about the visual arts) in order to establish and appraise varying interpretations
- analysing secondary sources in order to explore and explain particular aspects of the visual arts
- using primary source material for analysis, with emphasis on a particular aspect of visual arts
- collecting and analysing reproductions of artworks, possibly leading to a comparison of similar or different images.

Students should also demonstrate awareness of other issues surrounding the artworks studied.

- Do I show an awareness of the value and limitations of the art I am studying through analysing its origin and purpose?
- Do I show a consistently good artistic understanding in setting the research question into context and addressing it fully and effectively?

Relevant outcomes of this analysis should be integrated into a well-substantiated argument.

- With what evidence do I support my comments and conclusions?
- Is this evidence relevant and well founded, and not based simply on my preconceptions?

The emphasis of the EE should always be on written analysis, interpretation, evaluation and the construction and development of a sound argument.

Visual reference material

The inclusion and discussion of appropriate visual reference material is mandatory. Such material must, however, be directly supportive of, and relevant to, the analysis or argument. Images should be appropriately presented and acknowledged and should appear in the body of the essay, as close as possible to the first reference.

In order to promote personal involvement in the EE, the use of local and primary sources should be encouraged wherever possible. Where students do not have access to primary sources they may rely on high-quality reproductions or images of sources.

Students are expected to evaluate critically the resources consulted during the process of writing the EE by asking themselves the following questions.

- Which sources are vital to the support of my ideas, opinions and assertions?
- Which sources do not contribute to the analysis?

Finally, an EE in visual arts is a formal essay, so students must pay careful attention to the requirements of the assessment criteria. Frequent reference to the assessment criteria by both the supervisor and the student will help keep a sharper focus on the project.

Examples of topics, research questions and suggested approaches

Once students have identified their topic and written their research question, they can decide how to research their answer. They may find it helpful to write a statement outlining their broad approach. These examples are for guidance only.

Topic	Cultural influences on Pablo Picasso’s work
Research question	Picasso: individual genius or cultural thief?
Approach	An investigation of the extent to which selected images in Picasso’s work may have been appropriated from other cultural sources.

Topic	Architectural influences: the Pompidou Centre
Research question	How were Sir Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano influenced by the Maison de Verre designed by Pierre Chareau in their design and construction of the Pompidou Centre in Paris?
Approach	An original investigation into the stylistic similarities in the architecture of these two buildings.

Topic	The impact of immigration on an artist’s work
Research question	What is the impact of transcultural experience on the art of Gu Xiong?
Approach	An investigation into the effects of migration, from China to Canada, on a selected artist’s work.

An important note on “double-dipping”

Students must ensure that their EE does not duplicate other work they are submitting for the Diploma Programme. For example, artists and art works selected for study within the art comparative study task would not be appropriate for study within the EE.

The visual arts EE and internal assessment

An EE in visual arts is not an extension of the internal assessment (IA) task. Students must ensure that they understand the differences between the two.

Supervisors play an important role here in guiding students on these distinctions. Students risk their diploma if academic misconduct is detected.

Interpreting the EE assessment criteria

Criterion A: Focus and method

(Strands: Topic, Research question, Methodology)

The EE must be specific and sharply focused on a research question that is well connected to the visual arts. In addition to traditional forms of so-called “fine art”, the visual arts should be understood to also include some aspects of architecture, design and contemporary forms of visual culture.

Titles must give a clear indication that the research is significant and should not, for example, lead to a simple narrative account of an artist’s life or compare the work of two randomly chosen artists.

While a topic with opportunities for access to original artworks is a good choice, this is not a requirement and students should not shy away from library-based research.

If students choose a popular topic that has been well researched by others (eg an essay on Banksy or the French Impressionists), they must attempt to structure a research question that may lead to a new point of view, focus or interpretation.

The significance of the research must be explained and some indication of how the research question relates to existing knowledge in the visual arts must be given.

In the visual arts, sources are expected to include visual images—some of which (depending on the area of research) may even be the student’s own photographs.

Students need to demonstrate that their essay has been well planned and that they have selected an appropriate approach to address the research question.

Criterion B: Knowledge and understanding

(Strands: Context, Subject-specific terminology and concepts)

Students must be critically aware of sources related to their area of study, particularly those that help to place their work in historical, social or cultural context.

Although the internet can provide a good source of visual material, it is expected that in choosing written sources that support their argument students will move beyond an exclusive reliance on internet references.

Students must demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the visual arts through fluency in the use of appropriate terminology when discussing formal artistic aspects (such as terms related to an understanding of the elements and principles of design).

Vocabulary used by art historians, critics and scholars in cultural studies may also be important (eg, using appropriate vocabulary related to artistic periods or styles). The student must try to maintain a consistent linguistic style throughout the essay.

Criterion C: Critical thinking

(Strands: Research, Analysis and Discussion and evaluation)

Students who are familiar with scholarly writing in the visual arts (art history, art criticism, cultural studies) will be aware of the need for clarity and coherence.

Students must be aware of the need to give their essays the backbone of developing argument that is clearly related to the research question.

A clear and logical argument is often achieved by making consistent reference to the research question throughout the essay.

Personal views, while they may be quite common in the visual arts, need to be supported by reasoned argument, often with reference to images, interviews with artists, site visits etc, as well as carefully evaluated written material.

While some biographical information may help to advance an argument, the simple recounting of an artist's life may not always be helpful.

It is important for students to evaluate their own research, particularly in terms of unresolved issues and further research questions that may be generated by their study.

Criterion D: Presentation

(Strands: Structure, Layout)

This criterion relates to the extent to which the essay conforms to accepted academic standards in relation to how research papers should be presented. It also relates to how well these elements support the reading, understanding and evaluation of the essay.

Students may provide a section and subsection structure to their essays, if this is appropriate for the topic area chosen. Students should be aware of the appropriate format for their chosen subject.

Use of images

Carefully chosen and referenced images form an integral part of an essay in the visual arts. Images should be placed and discussed in the body of the text. They should be scanned or copied at good resolution and be of a reasonable size.

Referencing images is as important as documenting text. The reference must include:

- artist's or designer's name
- title of the work
- ownership
- (where relevant) dimensions and media
- source from which the image was scanned or downloaded.

Students should give each image appearing in the body of the essay a brief caption (eg artist's name and title of the work). Full details can be given in a list of images placed immediately after the bibliography or references.

Any material that is not original must be carefully acknowledged, with specific attention paid to the acknowledgment and referencing of quotes and ideas. This acknowledgment and referencing is applicable to images, audiovisual material, text, graphs and data published in print and electronic sources. If the referencing does not meet the minimum standard as indicated in the guide (name of author, date of publication, title of source and page numbers as applicable), and is not consistently applied, work will be considered as a case of possible academic misconduct.

A bibliography is essential and has to be presented in a standard format. Title page, table of contents, page numbers, etc must contribute to the quality of presentation.

The essay must not exceed 4,000 words of narrative. Students should be aware that examiners will not read beyond the 4,000-word limit, or assess any material presented past this.

Criterion E: Engagement

(Strands: Reflections on planning and progress)

This criterion assesses the student's engagement with their research focus and the research process. It will be applied by the examiner at the end of the assessment of the essay, and is based solely on the candidate's reflections as detailed on the [RPPF](#), with the supervisory comments and extended essay itself as context.

Students are expected to provide reflections on the decision-making and planning process undertaken in completing the essay. Students must demonstrate how they arrived at a topic as well as the methods and approach used. This criterion assesses the extent to which a student has evidenced the rationale for decisions made throughout the planning process and the skills and understandings developed.

For example, students may reflect on:

- the approach and strategies they chose, and their relative success
- the [Approaches to learning](#) skills they have developed and their effect on the student as a learner
- how their conceptual understandings have developed or changed as a result of their research
- challenges they faced in their research and how they overcame these
- questions that emerged as a result of their research
- what they would do differently if they were to undertake the research again.

Effective reflection highlights the journey the student has engaged in through the EE process. Students must show evidence of critical and reflective thinking that goes beyond simply describing the procedures that have been followed.

The reflections must provide the examiner with an insight into **student** thinking, creativity and originality within the research process. The **student** voice must be clearly present and demonstrate the learning that has taken place.