

May 2015 extended essay reports

English B Subject Report

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0-7	8-15	16-22	23-28	29-36

The range and suitability of the work submitted

The May 2015 session included a reasonably wide range of topics, though there are very few examples of Category 1, language based essays. Examiners' experiences varied but it was agreed that Category 3 literary topics are still generally the most successful of the group. These essays have tended this session to include more on popular modern texts rather than only on 'safe' well-known traditional texts and were fairly well grounded with the more successful students showing good awareness of meaningful literary analysis. Less successful students tended to rely on plot summary and/or personal reaction to the text often failing to use sufficient textual evidence in support of the ideas in the essay. It is important for students and supervisors to remember that all texts analysed must originally have been written in English.

Many candidates and supervisors continue to have difficulty understanding the focus of Category 2 essays, some of which were far too broad for meaningful investigation. Many also failed to address the socio-cultural impact on the use of English in Category 2a essays, and a number in Category 2b failed to examine cultural artefacts with a focus on English speaking countries and cultures. Media-based research questions were almost always either too broad in scope, or they set out to analyse specific language within the media, yet failed to do so within the body of the essay, resulting in vague generalities. The essays on various subcultures in Category 2 (e.g. rap/hip hop culture, or specific school populations etc.) were noticeably weak, lacking in viable sources and heavily reliant on students' personal knowledge. Students and supervisors must understand that the Category 2 heading "Culture and Society" is divided into two more focused perspectives, one based on language impact and the other on artefacts reflecting the culture/language, and should by no means mean that any broad cultural topic is acceptable. It is, however, acceptable to combine categories such as a category 2b and Cat 1 essay focusing on particular language use in English news reports, advertisements or speeches, for example.

The bottom line is that any Category 2 topic must aim to directly reflect some understanding of the target culture/language. If the candidate cannot state how it is related, then the question

needs revision. It is unfortunate that some candidates spend hours on an inappropriate topic not in any way related to the prescribed categories. Supervisors must help students to choose suitable and researchable topics. Topics in Group 2 should aim to “develop [students'] awareness and knowledge of the language studied and their understanding of the culture concerned.” (Extended essay guide, 28).

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: research question

Candidates must understand the difference between a title (general subject) and a properly structured research question that falls under one of the 3 topic categories. The best essays carry a clear, well-focused question that can be argued effectively. In weaker essays, the question is most often phrased too generally or lends itself to description rather than argument.

Criterion B: introduction

Introductions need not be terribly long. Many candidates struggled with establishing why their investigation was worth undertaking or how it was connected to the target language/culture specifically.

Criterion C: investigation

Candidates must be able to recognize sources with inherent scholarly authority. There should be evidence that the sources listed in the bibliography were cited. Poorly self-made 'surveys' were rarely effective as primary sources. Other questionable sources included Cliff's notes, Wikipedia, blogs etc.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Knowledge and understanding of the topic studied was most often satisfactory. Though candidates demonstrated knowledge, this was not always matched with a clear understanding of that knowledge in context. Merely stating a series of facts is not sufficient for the higher marks.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

The structure of the essays overall was good, and there were only a few problems with coherence and repetition. Successful submissions offered plausible arguments supported by references. Weaker candidates tended to write descriptive or narrative accounts. One examiner noted that some candidates tended to present a “compilation of everything they know about a given topic without advancing any arguments or applying analytical skills.”

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills

The application of analytical skills was generally weak. Claims were often unsupported or were superficial and anecdotal. Candidates who wrote purely descriptive essays were affected most.

In all categories, more integrated use of pertinent quotations is needed, and less description and biography that does not contribute to the argument or analysis.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject:

The level of English was solid overall, though the range varies. There was evidence of generally appropriate academic style. A smaller number of students wrote in an informal, colloquial voice which undermined the essay as an academic piece of research. Marks of 2 seemed common, suggesting somewhat more accuracy needed in vocabulary choice and usage.

Criterion H: conclusion

Most conclusions were consistent with the essay. However, a significant number of essays did not present a new synthesis in light of what was discussed. Successful candidates linked the conclusion to the evidence discussed in the rest of the essay.

Criterion I: formal presentation

Nearly all candidates included the required formal elements (see EE Guide) thus reaching a satisfactory level. The highest marks scored seem to reflect conscientious supervision. However, too many students still seem ill advised when it comes to good citation and formatting practices.

Criterion J: abstract

The Abstract, which is not part of the essay corpus, is a straightforward summary of what has been written in the essay. Thus, the past tense is appropriate. A number of candidates confused parts of the introduction with parts of the Abstract. In their Abstracts, candidates seemed particularly weak at stating how their investigations were undertaken. Far too many leave out the conclusions they had come to.

Criterion K: holistic judgement

Supervisors' comments should not evaluate or attempt to grade the essay. Well-presented essays that convey scholarly enthusiasm for the chosen topic and include unstinting support from supervisors tend to achieve the higher marks.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

It is urgently recommended that candidates and supervisors thoroughly read the EE guide before embarking on writing and extended essay in the subject. Supervision should focus on helping students choose and develop an appropriate question for the subject, as well as to develop their project in relation to that question. Students must be guided more carefully about the appropriate choice of a research question. If sources are not readily available for a particular research question, students should be strongly encouraged to change it. Questions which do not have an apparent counter-argument should be avoided;

students should be encouraged to think about why a question is worthy of investigation. If the answer is obvious, there is no need to 'research' it. Considering that these are pre-university students, it is also recommended that the supervisors help students to see the difference between mature perspectives and relatively naive ones and, correspondingly, between sophisticated expression and a relatively simplistic one.

Students should choose a presentation and referencing style and be consistent with it. It is important to have students review the descriptors to know exactly what they are assessed against. Explanatory footnotes should not be used, but the information integrated into the essay body.

Students and supervisors would be well advised to seek out professional models and to consult with school librarians. More time should be spent ensuring that students know the requirements of the Categories (and sub-categories) of the Group 2 EEs they wish to write. Students must move beyond summary to meaningful analysis and quote from the sources being analysed/evaluated as evidence to support their claims. Students also need to know how to integrate their sources/research smoothly in their writing. Furthermore, they should learn to proofread their own work, especially in regards to the use of punctuation and common grammar errors. As such, candidates should be aware that the diverse range of sources is gauged on their reliability and quality and not on their quantity.

Supervisors must give appropriate comments in the Supervisor's report. Comments are valuable to understand the candidate's performance and progress in accomplishing the challenging task that he/she underwent. The results of the viva voce are often useful as the student reflects on the process more than the product.

Although lack of academic resources is a serious drawback in some countries, candidates and supervisors need to be reminded that on its own it is not an adequate excuse of submitting mediocre work. Some supervisors note the lack of resources where candidates go on to access a wide range of internet resources that are often utterly inappropriate for the topic. The conclusion from such a scenario is that it is not lack, but rather choice, of material that is wrong. Furthermore, candidates should try to engage critically with all references rather than merely present a long list of sources with little or no relevance to their own arguments.