Philosophy: Subject-specific guidance

See also: EE generic guide and EE Teacher Support Material

Overview

An extended essay (EE) in philosophy provides students with an opportunity to undertake a philosophical investigation into a topic of special interest.

The student is encouraged to:

- engage in serious personal thought
- explore in a disciplined and imaginative way a specific philosophical question, in order to
- arrive at a clear conclusion.

The topic and research question need to be carefully chosen so that they lend themselves to critical investigation rather than to descriptive or narrative responses.

The research question must be formulated as a question, not a statement, and must have a narrow enough focus to be discussed effectively within the word limit.

Choice of topic

The student's choice of topic may be stimulated by, for example:

- work done in class
- current events or issues of contemporary debate
- private reading or reflection
- curiosity about conceptual features of knowledge, beliefs and value systems not previously encountered by the student.

Disciplinary focus

The topic must be explicitly philosophical in nature, rather than, say, anthropological or sociological. Students should reconsider or amend their topic if it is interdisciplinary in nature or is not directly related to philosophy.

The topic should be precise and sharply focused, so that students can treat it thoroughly. For example, it may be preferable to choose as a starting point:

- a specific hypothesis rather than a general one
- an idea from one philosopher rather than several
- a single text by a philosopher rather than the whole of his or her work.

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
Doing versus being: language and reality in the Mimamsa school of Indian philosophy	Language and the nature of reality
An examination of Herbert Marcuse's views on art	Philosophical aspects of art and esthetics
The notion of freedom of speech in Spinoza's *Theologico-Politico Treatise*	Ethics in the 17th century
John Rawls' procedure of justifying principles of social justice	Philosophical views of social justice
The role played by reason in Anselm's investigation of the concepts of predestination and free will	Anselm's exploration of the mysteries of faith

Formulating a research question

Students must choose a research question that is philosophically relevant, can be treated effectively within the word limit and that lends itself to critical analysis and evaluation.

Topics that are mainly dependent on summarizing general secondary sources (such as textbooks and encyclopedias) are likely to lead to an essay that is essentially narrative or descriptive in nature and should be avoided.

Treatment of the topic

The treatment of the research question should include:

- a careful critical analysis of themes and/or texts, leading to
- philosophical exploration and the construction of an argument.

It is strongly recommended that any student considering writing an EE in philosophy should first read the current *Philosophy guide* and understand its approach.

This approach, which allows many different approaches to philosophical reflection, is based on the emphasis of the Diploma Programme philosophy course on **doing** philosophy.

Within this context, the EE should encourage students to:

- develop the ability to reason and argue
- learn to take a personal and independent position on philosophical issues.

Students should construct a personal philosophical argument that should be cogent, clear and supported by relevant and, if possible, original examples.

Coherence of ideas and attention to detail are necessary conditions for an effective philosophy EE.

Students should envisage counterclaims or objections, address them and, if possible, rebut them.

They should also explore the wider implications of the issues they raise without becoming irrelevant.

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	**The moral status of stem cells**
Research question	Is it justified to ascribe a moral status to stem cells?
Approach	An exploration and justification of criteria that might allow a moral status to be ascribed to stem cells.

Topic	**Art and politics in Hannah Arendt's "The Crisis in Culture"**
Research question	Are art and politics opposed or are they complementary in Hannah Arendt's essay "The Crisis in Culture" ?
Approach	An investigation into the relation between art and politics in "The Crisis in Culture".

Topic	**The roots of wisdom according to the Tao Te Ching**
Research question	Does wisdom necessarily imply acting in accordance with the order of nature, according to the Tao Te Ching?
Approach	An exploration of the idea of wisdom according to the Tao Te Ching.

Topic	**Religious language and AJ Ayer's verification principle**
Research question	Are religious statements meaningless if they cannot be verified?
Approach	An examination of whether religious statements are meaningless if they cannot be verified, based on AJ Ayer's verification principle in *Language, Truth, and Logic*.

An important note on "double-dipping"

Students must ensure that their EE does not overlap significantly with any other work they are submitting for the Diploma Programme.

The EE and IA

In particular, an EE in philosophy is not an extension of the internal assessment (IA) task. Students must ensure that they understand the differences between the two. Students must ensure that they understand the clear distinction between the IA and the EE. Whilst there is inevitably an overlap in the skills being developed, there are clear distinctions between the tasks; for example, the IA requires students to undertake a philosophical analysis of a non-philosophical stimulus.

Supervisors play an important role in guiding students on the distinctions between the two tasks. Students risk their diploma if academic misconduct is detected.

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Interpreting the EE assessment criteria

Criterion A: Focus and method

(Strands: Topic, Research question, Methodology)

The topic selected should be precise and narrow enough that it can be treated thoroughly in the word count—for example, a specific idea from one philosopher, or a single text or part of a single text.

Topics must be directly related to philosophy and should not be interdisciplinary in nature.

The aim of the essay is best defined in the form of a question.

The research question must be clearly indicated at the start of the essay and must be formulated as a question. For example, "Does wisdom necessarily imply acting in accordance with the order of nature, according to the Tao Te Ching?"

The research question must be clearly philosophical or open to sustained philosophical analysis and argument.

Topics to avoid are:

- those mainly dependent on summarizing general secondary sources (eg textbooks and encyclopedias)
- those that are likely to lead to an essay that is essentially narrative or descriptive
- general topics that are not well focused.

Sources should include:

- the works of philosophers
- dictionaries of philosophy
- textbooks and encyclopedias.

If non-philosophical sources are used, there must be a clear rationale and the examination must be distinctly philosophical.

Criterion B: Knowledge and understanding

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

The essay demonstrates the student's philosophical knowledge and understanding of the topic when it:

- identifies and exposes the basic philosophical issues immediately present in the research question
- presents and discusses philosophical concepts, ideas, arguments, perspectives and positions that are directly relevant to the research question
- is philosophically well informed and uses the information purposefully in order to support the argument and to broaden the scope of the exploration
- shows philosophical insight into themes or philosophers' views
- explores possible ways of understanding the issues or problems discussed

- shows an awareness of philosophical implications arising from the research question, or the ideas or arguments examined.

The first step to demonstrating knowledge and understanding is shown at the early stages of the essay when the research question is framed within the context of existing knowledge that is directly related to the research question.

An appropriate use of language in a philosophy EE implies the following:

- well-informed knowledge of the terminology of basic philosophical concepts and of the specific fundamental concepts relevant to the themes, authors or texts at work in the investigation
- a clear and effective communication of the exploration undertaken
- a precise and consistent formulation of the argument presented, where each section is following on from and connected to the previous one
- analysis and use of philosophical language directly related to, and functional for, the specific investigation
- a clarification of the use of the main expressions; some of them (definition, concept, thought, experience, perception, world and so on) are also part of everyday language and should be explained in their conceptual use
- many thought processes and mental operations implied in philosophy research are directly related to the use of language.

Descriptions of what activities such as "outline", "examine" and "describe" mean can be found in the *Philosophy guide*'s *glossary of command terms*.

Criterion C: Critical thinking

(Strands: Research, Analysis and Discussion and evaluation)

When the research question has been established, the proper planning of an essay should involve interrogating source material in light of the research question. The question should be explored through an examination of themes and/or texts. Students can use a wide range of sources, including works of philosophers, dictionaries of philosophy, textbooks, etc.

An appropriate and effective use of sources should take into account the following:

- descriptive approaches are not adequate for this kind of philosophical investigation. Students must present any information concisely. It must be relevant and directly related to the point they are trying to make
- when the research question refers to a source that is not directly philosophical (for example, literature, contemporary issues, cultural or local issues), students must examine it philosophically
- if students make use of internet-based sources, they should do so critically and circumspectly in full awareness of their potential unreliability

- students' analysis must not rely exclusively on textbooks. These should only be consulted insofar as they may stimulate students' ideas, provide guidance and encourage the development of a personal analysis and investigation.

Analysis is at the heart of philosophical method, but can be practised in many ways. For example:

1. It consists of breaking an idea, a topic or a question down into its components.
2. It can also be characterized as disclosing or working back to what is more fundamental by articulating relevant elements and structures, on the basis that more fundamental concepts have a broader explanatory power.

Evaluation should be the result of students developing their exploration and own line of reasoning concerning the research question. (But this is not the same as the mere statement of opinions or beliefs that are not the result of the specific investigation.)

- Analytical skills are shown by means of an in-depth and extensive critical philosophical treatment and discussion of themes, basic concepts and arguments.
- Evaluative skills are exhibited when ideas, arguments and perspectives are assessed from a consistently held and well-justified perspective with clear evidence and strong support.

Students require both analytical and evaluative skills to explore the research question. These are essential skills for students to develop into independent researchers in philosophy.

Accordingly, students should:

- ask themselves what they think about the research question, taking into account their own and other perspectives
- present reasons that support their position
- put forward possible objections or counterarguments that could be levelled against their position
- suggest strategies for overcoming these objections or counterarguments
- illustrate their position and alternative positions with supporting examples and relevant cases
- offer a possible and consistent answer to the question asked or a relevant exploration of the hypothesis stated, evaluating strengths and weaknesses.

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, with informative headings. Subheadings should not distract from the overall structure of the essay or argument presented.

Students should include a table of contents that includes a clear articulation of the main parts of the argument in answer to the research question. General and empty titles (such as introduction, development and conclusion) without reference to the specifics of the investigation are not helpful.

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 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.

Effective referencing can help to demonstrate the extent to which the student expresses a relevant personal response to the research question. It can also enable the student to give a better and more precise justification of their argument, and can lead to an improvement in its consistency.

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, nor assess any material presented thereafter.

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, after considering the student's *Reflections on planning and progress Form*

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
- setbacks 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.