

IB Extended Essay Complete Guide 2026 — Research & Writing

IB SL Study Guide

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Videos on this page: Watch: IB Extended Essay Overview · Watch: Writing a Strong EE Research Question

How to Use This Guide

- The Extended Essay (EE) is a **4000-word independent research essay** required for every IB Diploma candidate
- It forms part of the **IB Core** alongside Theory of Knowledge (TOK) and CAS (Creativity, Activity, Service)
- This guide follows the **current IB EE Guide** (first assessment 2018, in use for the 2025–2026 cohort)
- **Exam Alerts** flag the most common mistakes that prevent high grades
- **IB Tips** highlight what your examiner and supervisor look for
- **Worked Examples** provide model structures and research questions you can analyse

Aligned to the IB Extended Essay Guide — current assessment criteria (first examination 2018 onward)

Section 1: What Is the Extended Essay?

1.1 Overview

The Extended Essay is a **self-directed research project** culminating in a formal academic essay of up to **4000 words**. It is written in the style of a subject-specific academic paper — you choose the subject, formulate the research question, carry out the research, and write the essay largely independently, guided by a supervisor.

Key facts:

Feature	Detail
Word limit	4000 words (hard maximum — examiners stop reading at 4000)
Subject	Chosen by the student from the approved EE subject list
Research question	Formulated by the student with supervisor guidance
Supervision	Minimum 3 reflection sessions with an IB-registered supervisor
Assessment	External — marked by an IB examiner on criteria A–E
Total marks	34 marks
Submission	Uploaded to IB's IBIS system by your school coordinator

1.2 The EE in the IB Diploma

The EE is one of the three components of the **IB Core**:

1. **Extended Essay** — academic research
2. **Theory of Knowledge (TOK)** — epistemological reflection
3. **CAS** — experiential learning (Creativity, Activity, Service)

The EE and TOK together determine whether a student earns **bonus points** toward the final IB Diploma score.

1.3 The EE/TOK Matrix and Bonus Points

The combined EE and TOK grades determine up to **3 bonus points** added to your diploma total:

	TOK	A TOK	B TOK	C TOK	D TOK	E
EE A3	3	2	2	Fail		
EE B3	2	2	1	Fail		
EE C2	2	1	0	Fail		
EE D2	1	0	0	Fail		
EE EFail	Fail	Fail	Fail	Fail	Fail	

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: Receiving an E in either the EE or TOK results in automatic **diploma failure**, regardless of your total points. This is non-negotiable. An E means you must retake that component. Do not submit a half-finished essay.

IB TIP

IB Tip: Aim for a B or above in both EE and TOK to secure 2–3 bonus points. A combined A+A adds 3 points — equivalent to a grade boundary shift in one subject. These are “free” points if you invest the effort.

►Watch: [IB Extended Essay Overview](#)

VIDEO

Section 2: Choosing Your Subject and Topic

2.1 Which Subjects Allow an EE?

The IB permits EEs in the following subject groups. Every EE must be written in a **named subject** — you cannot write a general or interdisciplinary essay without a subject home.

Group 1 — Studies in Language and Literature: Language A: Literature; Language A: Language and Literature; Literature and Performance

Group 2 — Language Acquisition: Language B; Classical Languages

Group 3 — Individuals and Societies: Business Management; Digital Society; Economics; Geography; Global Politics; History; ITGS; Philosophy; Psychology; Social and Cultural Anthropology; World Religions

Group 4 — Sciences: Biology; Chemistry; Computer Science; Design Technology; Physics; Sports, Exercise and Health Science

Group 5 — Mathematics: Mathematics: Analysis and Approaches; Mathematics: Applications and Interpretation

Group 6 — The Arts: Dance; Film; Music; Theatre; Visual Arts

IB TIP

IB Tip: Choose a subject you are genuinely curious about AND one where your school has a capable supervisor. A great topic with a supervisor who cannot read your drafts critically is a significant disadvantage. Talk to potential supervisors before finalising your subject.

2.2 Narrowing From Area to Research Question

Many students make the same mistake: they pick a broad topic and never narrow it down. The process should look like this:

Level 1 — Subject: Biology

Level 2 — Field: Microbiology / Bacteria

Level 3 — Topic: Antibiotic resistance

Level 4 — Specific angle: Effect of temperature on the growth inhibition of *E. coli* by ampicillin

Level 5 — Research Question: “How does incubation temperature (20°C, 30°C, 37°C, 42°C) affect the minimum inhibitory concentration of ampicillin against *Escherichia coli* ATCC 25922?”

The progression moves from a field of interest to a single, testable question. At Level 5, you can immediately see what data you need, what controls are required, and how long the investigation will take.

2.3 What Makes a Strong Research Question?

A strong EE research question is:

MEMORISE THIS

Three Requirements for a Strong RQ

1. **Focused** — it addresses one specific issue, not a whole field
2. **Debatable / Analytical** — it requires argument, not merely description or narrative
3. **Researchable** — it can be investigated within 40 hours of work using available resources

Strong vs Weak Research Questions — Examples:

Subject	Weak RQ	Strong RQ
Biology	"What is antibiotic resistance?"	"How does incubation temperature affect the minimum inhibitory concentration of ampicillin against <i>E. coli</i> ?"
History	"What happened in the Cuban Missile Crisis?"	"To what extent was Soviet miscalculation, rather than US resolve, responsible for the resolution of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis?"
English	"What is the role of women in <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> ?"	"How does Atwood use narrative unreliability in <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> to critique the reliability of historical testimony?"
Economics	"What is inflation?"	"To what extent has the European Central Bank's quantitative easing policy between 2015 and 2022 contributed to inflationary pressures in Germany?"
Mathematics	"What is the Fibonacci sequence?"	"How accurately does the Fibonacci sequence model the spiral growth patterns of <i>Helianthus annuus</i> (sunflower) seed arrangements?"

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: "What is..." and "Describe..." research questions almost always produce descriptive essays, which are capped at a C for Criterion C (Critical Thinking). Your RQ must demand analysis, evaluation, or argument. Prefer "To what extent...", "How does X affect Y...", or "How effectively does..." over "What is..." or "Describe..."

►Watch: Writing a Strong EE Research Question

VIDEO

Section 3: Research Question Formulation by Subject

3.1 Sciences EE

Science EEs fall into two categories:

Experimental (laboratory-based): You design and carry out original experiments. The RQ must specify independent and dependent variables. Example: "*How does the concentration of copper sulfate (0.1–1.0 mol/L) affect the rate of catalase activity in potato tissue?*"

Literature-based (desk research): You analyse existing published data or studies. These are harder to score highly on because you must demonstrate deep critical engagement with methodology, not just summarise findings. Literature-based science EEs are acceptable but require exceptional critical analysis of primary sources.

IB TIP

IB Tip — Sciences: Examiners want to see that you understand the **limitations of your methodology**. Discussing sources of error, uncertainty ranges in data, and

potential confounding variables is essential for a high Criterion C score. A “perfect” experiment with no discussion of limitations will score poorly.

3.2 History EE

History EEs must be based on a topic where **primary sources** are available. The two most common RQ structures are:

- “**To what extent...**” — invites a balanced assessment of multiple causes, factors, or perspectives
- “**How significant was...**” — invites comparative weighing of importance

Avoid purely narrative RQs. A History EE that tells a story rather than arguing a thesis will be capped at a C for Criterion C.

The **historiographical context** is critical: you must engage with historians’ arguments, not just facts. Your essay should demonstrate awareness of how different historians have interpreted the same evidence.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Sample RQ Analysis — History

RQ: “*To what extent was Stalin’s collectivisation policy, rather than deliberate policy, responsible for the Ukrainian Famine of 1932–1933?*”

Why this works:

- Focused on a specific event (1932–1933 Ukrainian Famine)
- Sets up a genuine historical debate (collectivisation as systemic failure vs. intentional genocide)
- Requires engagement with opposing historiographical interpretations (e.g., Snyder vs. Davies/Wheatcroft)
- “To what extent” requires a nuanced, argued conclusion

3.3 English (Language A) EE

English EEs must be grounded in **close textual analysis** of literary or non-literary texts. The most common mistake is producing a plot summary or thematic description rather than a stylistic or linguistic analysis.

Strong English EEs focus on:

- A specific **literary technique** (narrative perspective, imagery, structure, irony, intertextuality)
- How that technique functions in the text to create meaning or effect
- **Comparative EEs** comparing two texts often score well if the comparison is genuinely analytical

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: An English EE that says “Chapter 3 is about X. Then Chapter 4 is about Y. This shows the theme of Z” is not textual analysis — it is plot summary with labels. You must show how specific language choices, structural decisions, or narrative techniques create the effects you are describing.

3.4 Economics EE

Economics EEs require the application of **economic theory and models** to a real-world scenario. The essay must include diagrams (they count toward the analysis, not the word count).

Strong Economics EEs:

- Apply specific microeconomic or macroeconomic theory (e.g., supply-demand analysis, Keynesian multiplier, game theory)
- Use real-world data (central bank data, World Bank, IMF) to ground the argument
- Evaluate the limitations of the theory or data

IB TIP

IB Tip — Economics: Diagrams in Economics EEs do **not** count toward the 4000-word limit. Use them liberally — a well-labelled supply-demand shift or Phillips Curve diagram communicates in seconds what would take 200 words. Unlabelled or irrelevant diagrams penalise Criterion D (Presentation).

3.5 Mathematics EE

Mathematics EEs are either:

Proof/derivation: Developing or proving a theorem, with the student generating the logical chain step by step.

Application/exploration: Applying a mathematical model to a real-world phenomenon (e.g., modelling population growth with logistic equations, exploring fractal dimension in natural objects).

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert — Math EE: A Mathematics EE that is simply a list of calculations with no explanation of the mathematical reasoning will score very poorly on Criterion C. You must write in full sentences explaining *why* each step follows from the last. The examiner should be able to follow your mathematical argument without a calculator.

Section 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Primary vs Secondary Sources

Type	Definition	Examples
Primary	Original sources — created at the time of the event or generated by you	Lab data you collect, historical documents, literary texts you analyse, interview transcripts, government statistics
Secondary	Sources that interpret or analyse primary sources	History textbooks, academic review articles, economic commentary
Tertiary	Compilations of secondary sources	Encyclopaedias, Wikipedia

IB TIP

IB Tip: Wikipedia is never an acceptable source in an IB EE. It is useful for finding sources (check the Wikipedia references section), but never cite it directly. Examiners recognise Wikipedia's structure and will penalise accordingly.

4.2 Methodology Varies by Subject

Sciences: Design a controlled experiment. Variables must be defined. Ethics approval may be required for research involving human participants. Document your procedure in enough detail that another person could replicate it.

History: Archive work, oral history interviews (with ethics approval), analysis of primary documents (speeches, treaties, letters, propaganda). You must evaluate the **origin, purpose, value, and limitation** (OPVL) of your sources.

English/Literature: The primary source is the text itself. Secondary sources are critical essays and academic commentaries. You are not gathering “data” — you are building an analytical argument from evidence in the text.

Economics: Data from official national and international organisations (IMF, World Bank, OECD, central banks, national statistics offices). Raw data must be processed — do not simply paste tables. Calculate relevant statistics, ratios, or indices.

Mathematics: Mathematical references (journals, textbooks for advanced material). Your primary source is the mathematical logic itself. Cite any datasets used for applied topics.

4.3 Ethics

The IB requires that your EE comply with ethical standards. Key rules:

- Research involving **human subjects** (surveys, interviews) requires **informed consent** and **anonymisation** where appropriate
- Research involving **animals** is restricted — you may not conduct experiments on vertebrates that cause suffering

- **Environmental research** must not disturb protected ecosystems

Your school will have an ethics review process. Start this early — delays here can set back your whole timeline.

4.4 The Researcher's Reflection Space and RPPF

The **Reflections on Planning and Progress Form (RPPF)** is submitted alongside your essay and is assessed separately on Criterion E. See Section 7 for full guidance on the RPPF.

Section 5: Structure and Formatting

5.1 Required Sections

The current IB EE specification (first assessment 2018) **removed the abstract**. Do not write an abstract — it will not be read and any words in it do not count toward your total.

The required sections are:

1. **Title page** — essay title (which should reflect your RQ), subject, word count, candidate name/number, school name
2. **Table of contents** — with page numbers (required)
3. **Introduction** — context, background, why the question matters, scope and limitations
4. **Body (argument development)** — organised into logical sections with sub-headings; develops the response to the RQ through evidence and analysis
5. **Conclusion** — answers the RQ directly; does **not** introduce new evidence or arguments; acknowledges limitations and suggests areas for further research
6. **References / Bibliography** — complete and consistently formatted (MLA, APA, or Chicago — check your supervisor's preference)
7. **Appendices** (if any) — raw data, full transcripts, supporting material that would interrupt the flow of the main text

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: The **conclusion must directly answer the research question**. A conclusion that says “In conclusion, this is a complex topic with many sides...” is not a conclusion — it is an evasion. Write a clear, qualified answer: “To the extent that..., my research suggests that X was the primary factor, though Y also played a significant role because...”

5.2 Formatting Rules

Rule	Detail
Word limit	4000 words maximum; examiner stops reading at word 4000
Font	Legible, 11–12pt (IB recommends Times New Roman or Arial)
Line spacing	1.5 or double spacing
Page numbers	Required
Word count declaration	Must appear on the title page
What counts	Body text including footnotes. Does NOT count: title page, table of contents, references, appendices, diagrams, tables, charts, captions

IB TIP

IB Tip: Write your first draft well over 4000 words, then edit down. Students who aim exactly for 4000 words tend to submit essays that feel padded. Aim for a tight 3600–3800 word draft, then review whether you need to expand any weak sections.

Section 6: Assessment Criteria A–E

The EE is marked externally by IB examiners against five criteria. Familiarise yourself with these before you start writing — not after.

Criterion A: Focus and Method (6 marks)

What it assesses: How clearly the topic is introduced, how well the research question is stated, and how appropriate the methodology is for investigating that question.

Marks	Descriptor
5–6	Topic is clearly explained; RQ is sharply focused and appropriate; methodology is clearly described and well-suited to the RQ; awareness of limitations
3–4	Topic and RQ are adequately explained; methodology is described but may not be fully justified
1–2	Topic is vague; RQ is unfocused or unclear; methodology is not described
0	No awareness of the need for a research question or methodology

IB TIP

IB Tip — Criterion A: The research question must appear **verbatim** in the introduction. The examiner marks this criterion partly by checking whether the essay does what the RQ promises. A mismatch between the stated RQ and the actual essay is penalised here and in Criterion C.

Criterion B: Knowledge and Understanding (6 marks)

What it assesses: How well you demonstrate knowledge of the subject area and understanding of the topic.

Marks	Descriptor
5–6	Demonstrates sophisticated understanding of the topic; uses subject-specific terminology accurately and consistently; knowledge is relevant and shows engagement beyond the classroom
3–4	Adequate knowledge; terminology mostly correct; some superficial areas
1–2	Limited knowledge; significant gaps or misconceptions; terminology misused
0	Minimal relevant knowledge

MEMORISE THIS

How to Score High on Criterion B

- Use subject-specific vocabulary precisely (Biology: mention specific enzymes, conditions; Economics: name the specific model you are applying)
- Go beyond textbook knowledge — read academic sources in your subject
- Demonstrate that you understand the *context* of your topic, not just isolated facts

Criterion C: Critical Thinking (12 marks)

What it assesses: The quality of your reasoning, your ability to analyse and evaluate evidence, and the coherence of your argument. **This is the highest-weighted criterion.**

Marks	Descriptor
10–12	Impressive critical analysis; argument is well-structured, balanced, and convincingly reasoned; counter-arguments addressed; evidence selected and evaluated critically; conclusion follows from analysis
7–9	Good analysis with some evaluative discussion; argument mostly coherent; conclusion relates to RQ
4–6	Some analysis but argument may be underdeveloped or inconsistent; conclusion partially addresses RQ
1–3	Mostly descriptive; little analysis; argument unclear; conclusion does not follow from the body
0	No attempt at analysis or argument

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: Criterion C is worth 12 out of 34 marks — 35% of your total score. A descriptive essay with accurate information but no analysis cannot score above 6/12 on this criterion, limiting your total to around 22/34 (roughly a grade C). Analysis requires you to **interpret** evidence, **evaluate** its significance, and **argue** for a conclusion.

Criterion D: Presentation (4 marks)

What it assesses: The formal structure of the essay — layout, citations, bibliography, use of diagrams/tables, and overall adherence to academic conventions.

Marks	Descriptor
3–4	Correct academic format; bibliography present and consistently formatted; all sources cited; diagrams/tables labelled and referenced in text; page numbers present
1–2	Some structure present; bibliography incomplete or inconsistently formatted; some citations missing
0	No bibliography; no citations; no page numbers

IB TIP

IB Tip — Criterion D: Citations and bibliography are a binary issue — either they are complete and consistent or they are not. Set up your reference manager (Zotero, Mendeley, or even Google Docs' citation tool) from the first source you read. Retroactively creating a bibliography is the single most stressful part of EE writing.

Criterion E: Engagement (6 marks)

What it assesses: Your intellectual engagement with the research process, as evidenced through the **RPPF** (Reflections on Planning and Progress Form). This criterion is assessed from the RPPF, **not** from the essay itself.

Marks	Descriptor
5–6	Reflections are insightful and specific; demonstrates intellectual initiative; shows genuine engagement with research challenges; reflections develop meaningfully across the three sessions
3–4	Adequate reflection; some specific insight; some development across sessions
1–2	Superficial reflection; limited engagement with the research process
0	Reflections not submitted or entirely superficial

See Section 7 for detailed guidance on writing strong RPPF reflections.

Section 7: The RPPF — Reflections on Planning and Progress Form

7.1 What the RPPF Is

The RPPF is a **500-word maximum form** with three reflection entries, written at three specific points in your EE journey:

1. **Reflection 1 (early stage):** Written after your first formal supervisor meeting, once you have your subject and initial research question
2. **Reflection 2 (mid-point):** Written approximately halfway through, after you have conducted substantial research but before your final draft
3. **Reflection 3 (viva voce):** Written after your viva voce conversation with your supervisor

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: The **viva voce** is a short (10–15 minute) interview between you and your supervisor conducted at the end of the EE process, after your final draft is submitted. It is **not** an assessment — you cannot pass or fail it. Its purpose is to allow you to reflect on what you learned, and your supervisor uses what you say to authenticate the essay as your own work. Do not be nervous; be reflective.

7.2 What to Write in Each Reflection

Reflection 1 (approximately 150–200 words):

- What research question are you investigating, and why did you choose it?
- What initial research have you done?
- What challenges have you encountered or anticipated?
- What is your plan for the next phase?

Reflection 2 (approximately 150–200 words):

- What progress have you made since Reflection 1?
- What unexpected findings, problems, or changes in direction have you encountered?
- Has your RQ evolved? If so, why?
- What analytical insights are emerging?

Reflection 3 (approximately 100–150 words, after viva voce):

- What did you learn from the EE research process overall?
- What would you do differently?
- What was the most intellectually significant insight or challenge?

IB TIP

IB Tip: The RPPF is looking for **intellectual honesty and growth**. Examiners are suspicious of reflections that describe a perfect, problem-free process. Writing about a mistake you made, a source that proved unreliable, or a direction you abandoned and why demonstrates genuine engagement. “Everything went well” earns a 0–2.

7.3 RPPF Checklist

MEMORISE THIS

RPPF Must-Haves for a Score of 5–6

- Each reflection is specific to this essay — not generic advice to future students
- At least one reflection discusses a specific challenge or change of direction
- Reflections show development from early uncertainty to growing analytical confidence
- Reflection 3 demonstrates genuine intellectual growth
- Total length is within 500 words

- No overlap with the essay text — the RPPF is a reflection on the process, not a summary of findings

Section 8: Timeline

8.1 Typical EE Timeline (Year 1 May — Year 2 March)

The EE spans roughly 10–11 months. Most schools have internal deadlines earlier than the IB submission date. The following is a typical schedule for students who begin in the second half of Year 1.

Period	Milestone
Year 1, May	Choose subject and broad topic area; identify potential supervisor
Year 1, June	First supervisor meeting; draft initial research question; submit for approval
Year 1, Summer (Jul–Aug)	Initial research (reading, data gathering, experiment design); write Reflection 1
Year 1, Sep–Oct	Main research phase; primary data collection (if experimental); draft introduction and first body section
Year 1, Nov–Dec	Complete first full draft; submit to supervisor for feedback; receive and review comments
Year 2, Jan	Write Reflection 2; revise based on supervisor feedback; strengthen argument structure
Year 2, Feb	Second full draft; final structural editing; bibliography check
Year 2, Mar	Final proofreading; word count check; submit final essay to school coordinator; viva voce; write Reflection 3

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: The most common EE failure mode is poor time management.

Students who leave all primary research until December find themselves submitting an under-researched essay or missing the internal deadline. Block out EE time in your calendar the same way you would for a subject exam.

Section 9: Subject-Specific Tips

9.1 Sciences EE

- **Pilot experiments are essential.** Run a small-scale pilot before committing to your full data collection. Identify what variables need tighter control. Many experiments fail on the first attempt — build this into your timeline.
- **Quantitative data analysis:** Calculate means, standard deviations, and appropriate statistical tests (e.g., a t-test for comparing two means, ANOVA for multiple groups). Raw data tables belong in the appendix; processed results and graphs go in the body.

- **Safety and ethics:** If using any chemicals, organisms, or equipment with risk, note your safety precautions. Failure to address safety reduces your Criterion A score.
- **Graph labels:** Every graph needs a title, labelled axes with units, error bars where appropriate, and a figure caption.

9.2 History EE

- **Source evaluation is mandatory.** For every primary source you use significantly, evaluate its origin (who created it, when, and where), purpose (why it was created), and the limitations that flow from those factors. This is not a separate section — weave source evaluation into your analysis.
- **Avoid Whig history.** Do not narrate history as a story of inevitable progress or inevitable catastrophe. Counterfactual awareness (what *could* have happened differently) strengthens analytical essays.
- **Geographic and temporal precision:** Never write “at this time” — always specify the date or period. Never write “in Europe” when you mean “in France.”
- **Secondary source diversity:** Engage with at least two historians who offer different interpretations. Identifying and evaluating historiographical disagreement is essential for the highest Criterion C marks.

9.3 English (Language A) EE

- **Close reading over sweeping claims.** Every analytical claim must be supported by a specific passage, line, or word choice from the text. Examiners want to see you unpick language, not describe themes.
- **The “how” question:** Even if your RQ asks “to what extent,” the answer must address *how* the author achieves the effect. Technique → effect → significance.
- **Avoid “the author is trying to say...”** You do not know what the author intended. Write about what the text *does* or what effects it *produces*.
- **Minimum two texts** for comparative EEs — ensure they are genuinely comparable and that the comparison illuminates something neither text could reveal alone.

9.4 Economics EE

- **State the model before applying it.** Do not assume the examiner will fill in gaps. If you are applying the aggregate demand/aggregate supply model, explain its assumptions before applying it to your case study.
- **Definitions matter.** Define key economic terms on first use — inflation, GDP, exchange rate — according to standard IB Economics definitions.
- **Evaluation is separate from analysis.** Analysis says “X happened because of Y.” Evaluation says “but this conclusion is limited because Z, or because the data from source Q is unreliable due to measurement differences.”
- **Real-world data must be dated and sourced.** “According to the ECB Annual Report 2022...” not “data shows...”

9.5 Mathematics EE

- **Show every step.** Mathematical arguments require every logical step to be explicit. Skipping steps because they seem obvious loses marks on Criterion C.
- **Introduce notation.** Before using any mathematical symbol, define it. “Let n represent the number of seeds per ring.”
- **Connect mathematics to the real world.** If your EE is an applied exploration, always bring the mathematical result back to the real-world context. What does the value of $r^2 = 0.92$ actually tell us about sunflower growth?
- **Avoid complexity for its own sake.** Some students use advanced techniques to impress, then cannot explain them. A well-explained exploration using A-level calculus scores higher than an unexplained application of Fourier transforms.

Section 10: Common Mistakes

MEMORISE THIS

The Ten Most Common EE Mistakes

1. **Research question too broad** — “What are the causes of World War One?” cannot be answered in 4000 words
2. **Descriptive, not analytical** — describing what happened rather than arguing why it matters or what it shows
3. **Weak conclusion** — introducing new evidence or ideas in the conclusion, or failing to answer the RQ
4. **Ignoring the RPPF** — treating the RPPF as an afterthought when it is worth 6/34 marks
5. **Late start** — leaving primary research until November of Year 2 and submitting under-researched work
6. **Over-reliance on secondary sources** — using Wikipedia, textbooks, and student-facing websites instead of academic sources
7. **Insufficient subject-specific terminology** — writing a Biology EE that avoids biological vocabulary signals shallow engagement with the subject
8. **Diagrams without explanations** — every diagram must be referenced in the body text and its relevance explained
9. **Inconsistent citation format** — mixing APA, MLA, and Chicago within one bibliography
10. **Exceeding 4000 words** — the examiner stops reading at 4000 words; content beyond the limit is invisible

Section 11: Practice — Sample RQ Evaluations and Model Outline

11.1 Evaluate These Research Questions

Read each RQ and decide: is it strong, weak, or borderline? Then read the verdict below.

- ▶ RQ 1: “What are the effects of social media on teenagers?”
- ▶ RQ 2: “How does the concentration of hydrogen peroxide (0.5–3.0 mol/L) affect the rate of decomposition catalysed by catalase extracted from *Solanum tuberosum* (potato), as measured by oxygen bubble count per 30 seconds at 25°C?”
- ▶ RQ 3: “To what extent did American economic policy contribute to the 1997 Asian financial crisis?”

11.2 Model Essay Outline with Marking Commentary

RQ: “*To what extent was the Soviet miscalculation of American resolve, rather than US coercive diplomacy, responsible for the peaceful resolution of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis?*”

Subject: History

Introduction (approx. 350 words)

- Context: Cold War tensions by 1962; why Cuba became a flashpoint
- State the historiographical debate: traditionalist interpretations emphasise Kennedy’s strength; revisionist accounts (e.g., James Blight) emphasise Khrushchev’s rational cost-benefit analysis
- State the RQ verbatim
- Scope: essay will focus on Soviet decision-making in October 1962, using declassified Politburo transcripts and Kennedy White House tapes

Marking note: Strong Criterion A — RQ stated clearly, methodology (primary sources) explained, limitations acknowledged (no full access to Soviet internal deliberations until 1990s)

Body Section 1: The Case for American Coercive Diplomacy (approx. 900 words)

- Evidence: ExComm decision to use a naval quarantine rather than airstrikes; Kennedy’s public ultimatum; the credibility of the US threat to escalate
- Analysis: How the quarantine created a credible but limited threat that gave Khrushchev room to back down without public humiliation
- Source evaluation: Kennedy White House tapes (primary, October 1962) — value: shows deliberate US strategy; limitation: recorded after the fact in some cases, and Kennedy knew recording was occurring

Body Section 2: The Case for Soviet Miscalculation (approx. 900 words)

- Evidence: Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin's memoirs; Khrushchev's letters to Kennedy; 1989 Havana conference revelations that Khrushchev was unaware of US conventional military superiority in the Caribbean
- Analysis: Khrushchev's gamble was based on the assumption that Kennedy would not risk war over Cuba, given the Berlin Wall episode of 1961. This miscalculation — not US strength — explains why Khrushchev approved the deployment in the first place
- Source evaluation: Khrushchev Remembers (Khrushchev, 1970) — value: direct testimony; limitation: self-serving memoir written after his removal from power

Body Section 3: Synthesis and Evaluation (approx. 600 words)

- Both factors were necessary: US resolve mattered because it raised the cost of the Soviet position; but Soviet miscalculation created the crisis and Soviet recalculation (not US coercion alone) resolved it
- Counter-argument addressed: Some historians (e.g., Fursenko and Naftali) argue Kennedy's back-channel deal (removal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey) was more significant than public resolve — evaluate this evidence

Conclusion (approx. 250 words)

- Direct answer: Soviet miscalculation was the more significant factor in both creating and resolving the crisis, but US coercive diplomacy provided the conditions under which Khrushchev could retreat
- Qualified conclusion: "To the extent that peaceful resolution required both a credible threat and a face-saving path, neither factor alone is sufficient"
- Limitation: Analysis is constrained by the partial availability of Soviet archives prior to 1989
- Further research suggestion: The role of Robert Kennedy's back-channel communications with Anatoly Dobrynin

Marking note: Strong Criterion C — argument is developed across three sections, counter-arguments addressed, conclusion directly answers RQ without introducing new evidence. Criterion B: subject-specific vocabulary (ExComm, quarantine, back-channel diplomacy) used accurately. Criterion D: bibliography should follow consistent citation format.

IB TIP

Final IB Tip: The best Extended Essays are written by students who are **genuinely curious** about their research question. If you pick a topic because it seems easy rather than because it interests you, the lack of engagement will show in your Criterion E reflections and in the depth of analysis in the essay itself. Choose something you will want to discuss at dinner, not something you want to finish as quickly as possible.

