

## Formatting Your Research Question:

Once you know your extended essay subject, your next step is to choose a question.

Often, questions will be framed as “**To what extent does...**”. Initially, this may phase some students; however, framing your question in this way allows you to explore different perspectives. Following multiple perspectives, and critically analyzing each of these, is key to success in the extended essay. Therefore, **try and shape your question so that more than one point of view can be taken.**

Similarly, **make the question focused!** Having a focused question will guide your research (saving you time) and show that you can explore one area in detail.

**For example, here are 2 examples of Economics extended essay questions:**

1. To what extent do social media platforms compete with each other?
2. To what extent do Facebook and Twitter operate in a duopoly in the UK social media market?

Number 2 is more focused than number 1, allowing for greater in-depth research into which areas they are competing over. You could focus this question further by analyzing how Facebook and Twitter are used by students at your school and undertake an Economic survey to gather this data (giving you room for an evaluation of your data set as well). **There are 6 marks for focus and method, with 12 marks for critical thinking – This means having a research question that allows you to explore a specific area in detail will definitely help you to score highly.**

## What is your question actually about?

“A good research question is one that asks something worth asking” – Extended Essay Guide

It can be easy, after digging through mountains of research and writing an elegantly worded question, to forget what the original point of your topic was. It's also easy to let the research and information take you far away from your original intention. This is absolutely fine, and even to be expected; often in-depth research and thinking take us to a more interesting place than we ever could have reached originally. Except that it's important to take a step back from all of that work and really question whether the place you have ended up is what you want to be writing about.

The first step is to know what your question is really about, beneath the fancy words and clever ideas.

The second step is to ask yourself if your question is truly interesting. Does it present a possibility that intrigues you?

If you either can't pin down the point of your question, or you admit to yourself that actually that point is rather boring, it's time to reassess. A good way to refine your question in a way that will solve this, without throwing away all the work that you have done, is to start picking the question apart. Work out the different elements being addressed in the question so that you will be able to dig as deeply as you can into the situation being examined. If this feels like an effort, the thing to remember is that a good question will make it a lot easier to score points when you are answering the question in your essay.

Exercise : take your draft question and pick out the keywords. Combined, do they make a good summary of your topic? More importantly, do they point towards just one topic? The keywords of your question should encompass all the main things you will address in your essay, so keep these to-hand throughout the writing process and use them as a guide for what you should and shouldn't include in your plan.

### Is your question specific enough?

"The Extended Essay is an in-depth study of a focused topic" – Extended Essay Guide

Your question should define its own limits. In other words, it should be specific enough that you can answer it in 4,000 words. And any IB graduate will tell you that 4,000 words are not a lot. It's okay if some aspects of your question need further explanation, and in fact, the Guide itself recommends that you analyze your title during the essay. However the key is to choose which variables you leave open. There is no point in wasting time explaining a phrase or word in your essay when a simple change of word would solve everything. And if every word could mean two different things, this means there are two different essays you could be writing and the essay will feel unfocused as a result.

### Different types of words that create ambiguities include:

**Subjective words** such as success, failure, influence, significant

**Words that could refer to multiple things** such as novels, lichens, lower-middle class

**Words that you'll need to define** such as themes, soul, tradition

**A good Extended Essay question should contain just a few of these ambiguities.**

### Can you answer your question?

"Structure a reasoned argument in response to the research question on the basis of the material gathered" – Extended Essay Guide

**When writing the essay you'll need to make sure that every idea you include links back to the question.** You'll need to show over and over again how each paragraph digs that little bit deeper into the question you laid out at the beginning. With that in mind, it's a good idea, now you've done your research, to really make sure that the material, ideas, and information you will be using are still answering the question that you set out to answer.

For example, imagine that you'd originally wanted to compare the pH levels of rainwater in London and in Spain. Perhaps during your background research phase, you realized that there is very little second-hand information that could help you answer this question, but there is a ten-year-old study about the pH levels of rainwater in London compared with Scotland. A possible option could be that you change your investigation to look at whether the pH levels of rainwater throughout the UK has changed in the past ten years. Alternatively, maybe you have already begun your first-hand research

but couldn't collect any rainwater during your trip to Spain. In this scenario, a 'plan B' might be to compare the pH levels of rainwater in different parts of London.

### Will the IB examiner approve?

Your question can score up to 2 marks out of the total 36 points. This might sound like a lot, but consider that this is over 5% of your total score which you can earn before you write a single word of your essay. With this in mind it's important to go back to the Extended Essay Guide to check that your question is doing everything that they want it to.

Exercise : Double-check that your question is fulfilling every criteria that it can. And to make this as easy as it can possibly be for you, we've made a handy checklist right here:

1. Is it specific?
2. Can you answer it?
3. Can you address any variables?
4. Can you justify any assumptions that it makes?
5. Do you have enough research to back up your investigation?
6. Is it interesting?

Once you've made certain your question is as brilliant as it can be, the next step is to start planning the essay itself!

### Sample Research Questions:

The table below gives some examples showing the difference between unclear and unfocused research questions and those that are appropriately clear and focused, lending themselves to in-depth research.

Unclear, unfocused, and unarguable research questions	Clear, focused, narrow research questions lending themselves to in-depth research
What was the impact of Ho Chi Minh's allegiance to Lenin?	To what extent was nationalism the guiding factor in Ho Chi Minh's adoption of Leninism in 1920?
What is the history of Chinese theatre?	How does the legacy of Mei Lan Fang contribute to modern Jingju?
How important is chlorophyll to plant life?	What is the effect of different concentrations of kinetin on leaves aging and the biosynthesis of chlorophyll?
How can the US government's spending policy be reformed?	To what extent did the rising COE prices affect the demand for new and used cars by the consumer population and hence affect the revenue generated by the Singaporean economy for the period 2012-16?

#### An important note:

A question that is unclear or too broad will result in a narrative overview of the issue or event being discussed and provide little scope for analysis and reasoned argument. The result of this is that IB examiners will not be able to apply the range of marks available in the assessment criteria, particularly in relation to criterion C (critical thinking).

## Phrasing your research question

Which phrases and words often appear in good research questions? Here are some phrases to consider and some phrases to avoid when articulating your research question. Discuss how the useful phrases can help you demonstrate the characteristics of a good research question (see word cloud above).

Useful phrases	Phrases to avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To what extent / degree...</li><li>• How effective is...</li><li>• How have the decisions of... affected...</li><li>• What is the role and significance of...</li><li>• What is the best / cheapest / quickest method for....</li><li>• In light of... how can one understand...</li><li>• What has been the influence of... on...</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can you prove...</li><li>• Is... to blame for...</li><li>• Are we better off without...</li><li>• What if everyone were to...</li><li>• Could....possibly be the most....</li><li>• Is it true that...</li><li>• What is the history of...</li></ul>

### Practice exercise: Formulating well-focused research questions

*Developing a narrow, focused research question is an integral part of your extended essay process. A research question will provide a path to guide you through your research and writing.*

<b>Step 1.</b> Choose your subject area	<i>Which subject area is of most personal interest to you? Is there something you are especially curious about in one of your IB courses? Did one of your ERP's from an earlier grade spark an idea that can be researched?</i>
<b>Step 2.</b> Choose a topic that interests you	<p><i>Describe your work in one sentence.</i></p> <p>I want to learn about _____.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> I want to learn about public funding for the arts.</p>

<p><b>Step 3.</b> Suggest a question</p>	<p><i>Try to describe your research by developing a question that specifies something about your topic.</i></p> <p>I am studying _____ because I want to find out (who, what, when, where, whether, why or how) _____.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> I am studying public funding for the arts because I want to find out how accessible the arts are to those people who are on low incomes.</p> <p><b>Direct question:</b> To what extent are the arts accessible to people who belong to the class of the working poor?</p> <p>Include a command term from your subject area to help form the research question.</p> <p>Will you be able to argue a specific position? What are some possible issues or arguments?</p>
<p><b>Step 4.</b> Evaluate your question</p>	<p><i>Answer the questions:</i></p> <p>Is there a range of perspectives on this topic?</p> <p>Does the research question allow for analysis, evaluation and the development of a reasoned argument?</p> <p>I am studying _____ because I want to find out _____ in order to understand (how, why or whether) _____.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> I am studying public funding for the arts because I want to find out how accessible the arts are to the working poor so I can determine whether tax dollars support cultural enrichment for all citizens regardless of their socio-economic status.</p>

<b>Step 5.</b> Restate your question using a different command term	<p><i>Asking the question in a different way might help you view your topic in a different way.</i></p> <p><i>How does analyzing ...</i></p> <p><i>To what extent ...</i></p>
<b>Step 6.</b> Review with your supervisor	<p><i>Is your supervisor able to understand the nature of your research?</i></p> <p><i>Is it clear to your supervisor how and why your topic is relevant in your subject area?</i></p>
<b>Step 7.</b> Reflection	<p><i>If you can adequately respond to the “so what?” question, you may be on your way to a clear and focused research question using your initial topic idea.</i></p>

You must now start some preliminary reading around the issue or topic. Remember that you will most likely need to revise your research question once you start to undertake your research. In this sense **your research question should always be considered provisional until you have enough research data to make a reasoned argument.**

Subject	Poor RQ	Good RQ
English A, Cat. 3	How racist are Disney's animated films from the 20th century?	To what extent does Disney successfully address its racist history from 'Song of the South' with 'The Princess and the Frog'?
English B, Cat. 1	What kinds of words gained new meaning during the 2020 Corona crisis?	To what extent does the language of Donald Trump during his Corona briefings in 2020 resemble the language of a political campaign?
Business Management	How has Uber disrupted the taxi industry?	To what extent has <b>the introduction</b> of Uber in Amsterdam challenged employment laws in the taxi sector?

Physics	How do dimple patterns on golf balls affect ball flight?	To what extent are hexagon dimple patterns on golf balls effective for high-handicap golfers?
Music	How are modern-day musicals inspired by operas?	To what extent does the musical language of Andrew Lloyd Weber take inspiration from classical opera of the eighteenth century?