

May 2018 extended essay reports

Psychology

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0-6	7-13	14-20	21-26	27-34

Range of Work

There was a good range of topics investigated by candidates. However, there were some candidates that attempted to apply theories in a subjective manner to explain modern phenomenon such as the use of a specific social media platform, a conflict situation or the behaviour of a political personality. This was not an acceptable approach. Candidates must also remember that interviews, surveys and experiments are not allowed as part of the extended essay in psychology.

There were some topics that tended to do poorly – these included essays on serial killers, genocide and origins of evil. In most cases, the essays were descriptive or did not focus on psychological research.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: focus and method

There were many strong questions. However, some questions were too broad - looking at nature *versus* nurture arguments or attempting to address all three levels of analysis (approaches). These questions were too unfocused and often led to a survey of theories and research with no central argument. On the other hand, some questions were so narrow - specifying age ranges, culture and gender restrictions - that the candidate was unable to find research that directly addressed the question.

Stronger essays included the scope and purpose of the essay in the introduction.

There were many candidates who had a limited number of academic sources, relying heavily on news sources, blogs, textbooks and popular psychology publications. Candidates should attempt to have 8 – 10 academic sources to support their arguments. In addition, it is important not to use outdated research. Candidates should attempt to look at their topics as a modern question, not as a historical one.

Criterion B: knowledge and understanding

There were many essays that lacked a clear focus on the research question. Often there were long “background knowledge” sections that were only of marginal relevance to the question. Several essays did not begin to directly address the question until very late in the essay. As a result, often very limited relevant research was used to directly address the question.

In addition, candidates must define key terms in the introduction to the essay. Many candidates failed to do so – or did so, but then did not abide by the definition within the essay. When candidates define terms, they should cite psychological sources rather than proposing their own definitions.

Often candidates listed several sources in their text, but did not outline any of the research in detail. This resulted in low marks for this assessment criterion which asks candidates to demonstrate “effective use and understanding” of research. Fewer sources that are explained, analysed and evaluated makes for a stronger essay.

The use of psychological terminology was problematic for some candidates. Words such as *prove*, *accurate*, *valid*, *reliable* and *credible* were often misused.

Criterion C: critical thinking

Several candidates struggled to show two sides of an argument. Presenting another level of analysis is not an appropriate way to do so. For example, when evaluating the effectiveness of SSRIs, it is not appropriate to then discuss the effectiveness of psychoanalysis; instead, research should be examined that does and does not support the effectiveness of SSRIs. This leads to a reasoned argument.

Candidates should analyse the research used and draw conclusions throughout the essay. Often studies were simply described with no analysis. Evaluation of the research was often of marginal relevance to the research question. Stronger essays discussed the value of the research in light of the question and also included a holistic discussion relevant to the question.

Many candidates struggled in their understanding of generalizability. Simple statements about “high” *versus* “low” levels of generalizability were often not supported and seemed to be limited to the composition of the sample, rather than the aim of the study. Often genetics studies were said to be low in generalizability because only one social class or culture had been studied. This does not demonstrate a clear understanding of generalizability in biological research.

Conclusions at the end of the essay should be more than an “add-on” and discuss outstanding issues and/or implications of the findings of the essay. Often conclusions simply repeated all the key arguments or made overly simplistic statements such as “it must be a combination of biology and environment that leads to the behaviour.”

Criterion D: presentation

Most essays met most presentation standards. Some candidates included abstracts, and this added to the word count. Very few candidates did not include an appropriate title page, table of contents or page numbers.

However, citation was generally poor. Many candidates did not use a standardized citation method. Candidates should be reminded of the minimum requirements stipulated by the IB in the document entitled *Effective citing and referencing* – these requirements supersede the referencing norms of a chosen system. Most significantly, there were many essays that were missing citations or had in-text citations that were not listed in the references – or vice versa. The overall mark is not affected by misuse of citation, but candidates risk being penalized for academic misconduct.

Criterion E: engagement

Many reflections simply gave a step-by-step description of the extended essay process. These earned low marks. Strong reflections included personal voice and discussed learning relevant to their research project as well as how problems were overcome.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

It is very important that supervisors read the Extended Essay guide carefully when preparing to work with candidates. Success on the extended essay depends on candidate ability to:

- Write a well-focused research question that leads to a debate, rather than to a descriptive essay. Candidates should focus on a single approach (level of analysis) and avoid “nature *versus* nurture” essays
- Write strong paragraphs that link research back to the research question
- Use a “less is more” approach to research. There should be around 8 – 10 pieces of research in the essay that is well explained and evaluated in the context of the question
- Determine which evaluation strategies are appropriate in light of a research question
- Locate academic sources to support an argument. Although not all sources must be from journals, it is expected that a significant amount of the evidence used in the essay be from peer-reviewed articles
- Cite sources using a consistent referencing system, while adhering to the minimum requirements set out in the document entitled *Effective citing and referencing*. When using direct quotes, candidates must include page numbers.
- Reflect on their learning during the research journey, rather than simply document the research process and the meetings with their supervisor in their RPPF.