Theatre extended essay

Contents

For grade boundary information, please refer to the Grade boundaries for Diploma programme coordinators document available on the PRC.

Extended essay

The range and suitability of the work submitted

As in previous sessions, a broad range of topics were tackled, but suitability and depth of research varied from excellent to poor. A passion for theatre evident in many essays at times resulted in academic excellence.

Most essays had a dramaturgical focus, inviting discussion of specific theatrical production(s), performance or staging techniques used in theatre history, and/or on how actors, directors, scenographers and theatre artists applied analyses, theory and/or elements of a theatrical tradition to bring a piece of theatre to life onstage, in a workshop, rehearsals or applied theatre project.

Although often written by candidates who were clearly enthusiastic about their topic, a significant number of essays were disadvantaged by questions which did not speak to theatre practice; many were more appropriate to literature, film, music, dance, history or psychology, or failed to address the *praxis* of the theatre arts, making no reference to how a performance tradition, theory or play text is brought to life through scenic, technical or performance elements.

The strongest essays provided a well-structured response to a sharply focused research question, drawing on solid research methodology that included print sources, peer-reviewed scholarly articles, reviews of theatre productions, and/or reliable university- or theatre-sponsored websites. Most candidates complemented this traditional academic approach with empirical and/or experiential research; many chose to practically test research findings, or cited evidence from live theatre performances, museum visits and/or workshops. Those who consulted different types of source tended to demonstrate understanding of theatrical concepts and support assertions well.

The depth of research and quality of analysis ranged widely, however. In recent examination sessions more candidates relied on uncritical use of anonymous websites and online encyclopaedia; this generally resulted in discussions that lacked substance, and many practical explorations were inadequately grounded in research. There are many online sources that are academic in nature, and supervisors and librarians can help students in this area.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: focus and method

If the research question is inappropriate to the subject, achievement levels are capped in criteria A, B and C, so the impact of being supervised virtually was perhaps most felt in this criterion; shaping a question with a theatrical focus is crucial for student success in this task.

Although the majority of research questions were firmly rooted in the subject of Theatre, some were too ambitious to be addressed in any depth in a short documented essay, and some candidates chose problematic topics unsuitable to an investigation of theatrical performance and/or production; arguments often focused instead on literary analyses of play texts without a clear link to theatrical practice, or on techniques used by actors to prepare for television or movie roles, for example; others veered off subject to analyse lyrics or musical motifs.

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When introducing the topic, the most successful candidates clearly explained how they had tailored their research to the question. In weaker essays, especially those relying on general information websites, there was rarely any mention of research methodology. Most candidates, however, consulted reliable sources appropriate to an investigation in Theatre.

Videos of stage productions, theatre company websites, resource packs were cited more often than ever, as were virtual workshops and online interviews, and books and articles by directors, actors, and designers accessed through digital libraries.

As in the past, many students also undertook original research, practically exploring theatre theories or techniques, leading workshops or applying research to realize a lighting, set, mask or puppet design, for example. Examiners were impressed by the initiative demonstrated by these research-led investigations, and students' personal investment in the process often helped them sustain their focus and shape an interesting argument. At times, however, it was clear that a candidate mistakenly saw the EE as a creative task, rather than an exercise in academic research and writing. Action research, if attempted, is not an end in itself but than an opportunity to augment more traditional scholarly research and deepen understanding.

Criterion B: knowledge and understanding

The majority of students confidently handled source material; most consulted at least some appropriate sources specifically relevant to the topic and consistently referenced their research. The best work demonstrated knowledge and academic rigour, effectively supporting relevant points with evidence from books and scholarly articles, relevant websites, video sources, experiential and/or empirical research. On the other hand, many otherwise excellent essays were weakened by the failure to identify *where* theatre productions were viewed, to cite theatre workshops they had participated in or theatre-makers they had corresponded with as sources.

A number of candidates, however, found it difficult to support a reasoned argument driven by the research question. Research questions that were too broad or multi-pronged often resulted in vague or superficial generalizations. Many students slipped into "report" mode, offering lengthy plot synopses, broad historical surveys, or biographical information which did not further relevant arguments. In many essays the application of research was uneven; in fact, in some essays only direct quotes were referenced, in others, broad assertions lacked support.

While most wove quotes into their observations and used images to clarify and strengthen relevant arguments, weaker candidates merely inserted quoted passages and/or included visuals that were more decorative than illustrative. Often, it was those with a weak research base who were unable provide clear examples and evidence to support assertions. In general, the use of theatre terminology tended to be sound. That said, some students relied more heavily on terms more appropriate to literary or film analyses or made reference to music theory and musical concepts.

Criterion C: critical thinking

This criterion posed the greatest challenge to students. The strongest essays demonstrated critical thought with carefully crafted analyses of evidence drawn from a range of solid sources, including, in many cases, well-documented evaluations of live theatrical performances.

Examiners noted, however, that a number of essays offered arguments which were more descriptive than analytical. Many candidates offered unsupported personal opinions, and/or failed to apply research to support analyses, and so did not fully meet the requirements of this assessment criterion. Whereas original

research often provided excellent scope for analysis some students merely described a practical exploration or summarised data gathered in surveys they had conducted and drew broad conclusions which were not then supported by reference to other sources or more scholarly studies.

The quality of evaluation overall tended to be most limited in those essays whose research lacked substance. Generally, neither the essay nor RPPF entries revealed awareness of why sources such as SparkNotes, Crash Course videos, *Hollywood Reporter* or anonymous blogs may be considered inadequate or inappropriate to an investigation in Theatre.

To reach the upper markbands research must be critically evaluated, but many candidates failed to consider their methodological approach or source material. Weaker essays merely mentioned the utility of certain sources or included descriptions in annotated bibliographies. Given this criterion's weight, supervisors and candidates would do well to concentrate more on analytical argument and critical evaluation.

The strongest concluding arguments synthesize findings, drawing together the key threads of evidence, but many summative conclusions were very brief, and not entirely consistent with evidence actually presented in the essays or presented new information.

Criterion D: presentation

Presentation was generally satisfactory. Nevertheless, many essays were simply compartmentalized reports, and certain layout requirements were often not met:

- many cover pages did not provide both essay title and research question
- frequently the date that electronic sources were accessed was not included
- live theatre performances, workshops and correspondence were often not listed as sources in the bibliography

Criterion E: engagement

Several weaker essays scored well in this stand-alone criterion, but the reverse is also true. The goal should be to genuinely reflect on the process, from choice of topic through to the final reflection.

In the first two RPPF entries, however, students tended to simply report on their process step-by-step, rather than demonstrating an awareness that some avenues of research or approaches are more appropriate, identifying how challenges were met, or analysing how research affected conceptual understanding. Generally, the final entry was the most well-considered, yet apart from references to the importance of time management, most never addressed skills development or reflected on milestones or turning points in the process.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

Many candidates would benefit from additional guidance in:

- selecting a topic embedded in a theatrical performance/ production context. Although the investigation may bridge two subjects, the essay must remain on a theatre track
- framing a research question focused enough to be answered within 4000 words
- structuring a coherent, analytical argument in response to the research question
- the expectations of the assessment criteria and presentation requirements
- identifying a range of appropriate sources
- ensuring that if practical explorations are used, they supplement academic research

- providing a rationale for methodology and critically evaluating research
- how to reference sources - print, electronic, experiential, video or primary
- ensuring that RPPF entries are evaluative, rather than merely describing the process.

Further comments

In this session, a significant number of students included an Abstract, more than any session since May 2018. These were added to the total word count, which occasionally meant that the concluding paragraph(s) could not be assessed.