

English A

Overall grade boundaries

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

The range and suitability of the work submitted

On the whole examiners saw a wider range of literature (for Categories 1 and 2) and text types (for Category 3) which demonstrated perhaps an increase in student ownership of the task.

Category 1

Modern novels were by far the most popular choice, with essays on poetry and drama in the minority, although candidates who wrote on poetry topics often produced focused arguments that were aptly contextualized and grounded in literary terminology, and there were some excellent essays on Shakespeare and Arthur Miller (the two dramatists most represented). Popular texts, authors and research questions included *The Great Gatsby* and the American Dream; Plath and mental health; *The Book Thief* and colour; dystopian fiction (*1984*, *Brave New World* and *A Handmaid's Tale*), fairy tales, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Poe's short stories, and *The Hunger Games*. Other candidates chose to write on vampire fiction, science fiction and music lyrics along with an interest in exploring the graphic novel.

Generally, children's and young adult texts (Harry Potter, *Coraline*, fairy tales, etc.) are not aspirational enough and make life more difficult for the candidate where the depth of comment to sustain a critical reading of the text is lacking. Literature geared toward younger audiences such as L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* or Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon* tends to produce superficial essays that lack analytical development. Candidates and supervisors need to be reminded that this is a possible pitfall of choosing more simplistic works: pairing the more youth-oriented text with a more mature text perhaps helps the argument develop at a more sophisticated level.

A few students simply compared two poems or a limited selection of short stories which, again, failed to offer depth of comment. At the other extreme were cases of multiple texts – several Shakespeare plays, for example - which were far too ambitious.

Category 2

Often the most enterprising essays were in Category 2, where innovative and original choices of texts (for example, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* compared to Atwood's *The Edible Woman*) produced excellent and perhaps surprising areas for comparison and contrast.

Categories 1 and 2 were generally successful in terms of text choice, although writing about two texts often produced separate studies or “mini essays” on each – the ability to compare and contrast side by side should be encouraged, and where candidates do opt to compare two texts, they should ensure that there is some connection between them.

There was a fairly even gender balance in the choice of writers. It was disappointing, however, to find so few students exploring literature from African, South American, Middle-eastern, or Asian contexts; the majority of Category 1 and 2 essays were on a white, North American, or European author.

Category 3

Some excellent, innovative choices of topic and texts were seen, including an analysis of three contrasting TED talks on climate change; a deconstruction of the rap lyrics in *Hamilton*; a survey of the L'Oréal advertising campaign “Because You're Worth It”; a historical survey of emoticons / emojis, with specific examples; and a comparison of the British and US book jackets for the Harry Potter series, in their cultural context. In general, however, many examiners remarked on the poor quality of Category 3 essays with many being generalized studies which did not offer a study of an actual text or were too broad in scope; consequently, these often took the form of vague or generalized assertions about language or media without any depth. Very often the essays tended to be descriptive or packed with information rather than being evaluative and analytical.

Students that specified primary sources (e.g., articles from the NY Post and the NY Times, individual speeches, etc.) tended to do well. Particularly popular were political speeches as texts: the 2016 election was a popular topic, as was the language of the US president, but UK speeches about Brexit and Nelson Mandela featured also. Other commonly-chosen areas of study were female stereotypes in advertising, changes in Disney heroines over time, musicals and video games, and often a new angle on these topics was needed to take the candidate beyond simply expressing their personal enthusiasm for the text(s) under discussion or merely building on textbook examples.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: focus and method

There were some essays with a title, but no research question, on the title page. Whilst this was not a major problem when balanced with the other strands, it does contribute to the selection of the appropriate mark.

Similarly, there were some (otherwise very good) essays where only the primary texts were cited and, given the new rubric which specifically asks for a literature review, this did cost students a mark in the top mark band.

Most RQs were phrased as questions, and most had a clear, appropriate focus. Some RQs were awkwardly worded; some students disadvantaged themselves by choosing overly broad or unclear or inappropriate questions which then meant the rest of the essay suffered (and there was a “knock-on” effect on the marks for criterion C, as explained below).

Supporting the RQ, effective introductions need to justify why the topic and texts were chosen and why secondary sources are pertinent and have been used to inform the argument. Too often this was a missed opportunity.

Regarding the literature review, it is important that candidates writing Category 1 and 2 essays “place their analysis of their chosen text(s) in the wider context of the discipline” (EE Guide, p.112). Sometimes when political or social questions about the work are addressed, the candidates shift away from a Literature and Language subject focus on analysis of the text and instead simply address the context of the work without a close reading of the primary text.

Many candidates need to have a greater appreciation of the research aspect of the EE process. Simply recounting or paraphrasing primary and secondary sources does not show how that research has informed the argument. Students also need to understand that a few sources applied really effectively is better than a wholesale “scattergun” application. Essays with a wide range of effective and informed scholarly sources to support a clear and focused research question were rare.

The level 5-6 ought, in principle, to be achievable by most candidates; for “the research question to be clearly focused” and “the topic to be effectively communicated”, by utilizing the first meeting / reflection session effectively, the supervisor has the opportunity to provide robust guidance at the outset of the task.

Criterion B: knowledge and understanding

As a corollary to the above, under this criterion knowledge and understanding, where the topic has been chosen as an area of special interest by the candidate, should be at least “good” - if the relevant reading and research has been undertaken, an examiner would expect most candidates to achieve at least a 3 or a 4. Where this has not been the case, or where the mark did not quite reach the top band, the more usual problem was a poor selection of supporting source material which could not be applied effectively to demonstrate knowledge and understanding.

Most students had a good knowledge of their topic but this was not always linked to their sources, so there was a tendency to generalize. This happened particularly with Category 3 essays where students often found it hard to concentrate on the analysis of a specific text or texts. Many essays were purely descriptive, a problem which became most evident in criterion C.

The understanding of texts studied was overall quite sound with clear evidence of personal engagement with what students had read. However, some examiners reported that there was too much emphasis upon secondary research materials, to the detriment of close reading of the primary text. The RQ does of course demand that research is undertaken but this does not mean that a plethora of secondary texts and websites is required. It would be better to undertake research into the texts themselves, with perhaps a smaller number of appropriate contextual comments and references, to enable the candidate's voice to be heard as opposed to the critic's.

Most students offered thoughtful and detailed readings of their primary sources, especially in the case of literary essays. Understanding of their texts was illustrated through careful explanation of ideas, inclusion of evidence, and links made to secondary interpretations. The weaker essays however were quite limited, showing only superficial understanding at the level of plot/character via descriptive reference.

Technical terminology was generally used well, although reference to contextual and critical theory was not always relevant to, or well-integrated into the main argument. Some candidates were let down by a vague or insecure grasp of the key subject specific terminology on which the essay was based (*allegory, symbol etc*). However, where an overtly literary approach had been built in to the RQ, essays had the potential to fulfil this strand at the highest level.

Criterion C: critical thinking

As might be expected, the 12 marks available under this criterion had a huge impact on assessing the final quality of the essay. Most students ought to aim for a level of research, analysis and discussion which can at the least be described as "adequate". In practice, the mark of 6 / 7 was often a key deciding line – most candidates in the mid-range mark band could achieve a 7, because (in the words of the assessment strands) a 6 suggested that "the inclusion of irrelevant research detracts from the quality of the argument" or "conclusions to individual points are only partly supported by the evidence" and "the summative conclusion is only partially consistent with the evidence" - and the essay as a whole was better than these descriptors, taken together, would suggest.

In general examiners felt that this was the criterion with the widest variation; some candidates struggled to construct a coherent argument supported by appropriate references while others showed skill and insight with a fine level of exploration.

Essays which reached the highest mark band were easy to identify, displaying a confidence and fluency which underpinned a sophisticated argument, careful research, and, often, independent thinking about a challenging text or topic.

Under this criterion by far the most common weakness was to be descriptive rather than analytical; this has always been a key discriminator for Language A essays and this year proved no exception. Students needed to keep their focus on the RQ to avoid this. Arguments were usually structured, often with sub-headings, but close correlation to the research was not always maintained. Conclusions were included but these were more usually summary than synthesis.

A reasoned argument was usually attempted, although sometimes a candidate would become too descriptive. There was a tendency to write generally, sometimes quite aptly and thoughtfully, but without showing enough critical awareness of exactly how each text was written. There was not always the attention to, or the awareness of, the effects of language, imagery, structure (or in the case of Category 3 essays, the effects of language, colour, pictorial presentation, etc as appropriate to the text under discussion). Critical evaluation used to develop and consolidate points would carry many candidates beyond the “adequate” level.

Conclusions were sometimes simply repetitive of key ideas; not all conclusions offered some evaluation of limitations of the research/possible further areas for investigation.

Arguments were usually quite clearly developed and well-structured, even if this often remained at a straightforward, rather assertive level. Papers that were narrative retelling/summaries or descriptive restatements from the texts lacked analysis or a sense of evaluation. The final paper did not always reflect the potential of its research question.

Most of the research conducted was used effectively within the context of the discussion. Analysis was good or excellent when students offered a close reading of evidence from their texts. It seems that many students have forgotten that when a quotation is used, it is expected some discussion of meaning and effects is required for ideas to be made clear. That being said, many students developed thoughtful discussions about their texts and topics. It was clear some students had planned / outlined an argument before writing a draft and were thus able to develop excellent arguments. Features of these essays were relevant and progressive headings / sections, clear topic sentences, thesis statements, and conclusions that did more than simply repeat the introduction. Evaluation proved a limiting factor for many essays. Though many essays had thorough secondary research, this research was often used indiscriminately. Excellent critical thinking was seen when students disagreed with “experts” or critics, and used common interpretations as ways of starting a new discussion.

Many students are selecting sources related to history, biography, or philosophy rather than literary criticism or theory, drawing parallels between the work and either a second source or an historical issue. Students did not consistently have a clear lens through which to analyse and evaluate their works. This hindered their focus and how they went about presenting their findings.

Non-scholarly sources such as Shmoop or Sparknotes are often cited in bibliographies even though the “sound bites” that students glean from these online sources do little to advance their own arguments.

Criterion D: presentation

Again, in terms of marks, there was no reason for the majority of candidates not to score at least a “3” here. There were a surprising number of scripts containing no title page, bibliography, page numbers or table of contents and these all cost the candidate marks. Another draft (or better advice from a supervisor, or a careful reading of the instructions to candidates) would have saved marks here. Too many marks were ‘wasted’ through poor presentation, especially in relation to citations and referencing, but even in regards to

straightforward layout with – as above - a clear title page, table of contents and bibliography/works cited. Other layout issues concerned omissions of word count, poorly laid out bibliographies, and mis-paginations in the Table of Contents.

For “layout considerations (to be) present and applied correctly” proof-reading needed to be carried out to prevent marks being lost.

Often candidates would break the essay up into sections which hampered the progress of the argument or led to repetition. Sub-headings could be useful but some candidates had too many and thus the structure was fragmented. Headings were often arbitrary, resulting in essays that were really a collection of disparate observations. Others however were able to use the chapters and subheadings to real effect, complementing and contributing to the cohesive effect of the whole.

The use of appendices varied from highly effective to non-existent.

In terms of referencing, many candidates tended to write a paragraph as if it were their own and then enclose the critic's name in parentheses at the end: in such cases, it was difficult to tell where the critic's and the candidate's ideas began and ended.

Candidates also need to include references for information that go beyond general knowledge. Many scripts had to be raised as exceptions for suspected academic misconduct due to this issue. Students should be given the document entitled *Effective citing and referencing* so that they can understand the minimum requirements of a reference.

Criterion E: engagement

As expected, some weaker candidates were able to score at least a 3 or a 4 here (and exceptionally a 5 or a 6) for the detailed way in which they outlined the progress of the task, refinements or changes to its RQ and focus, and conveyed a sense of what had been achieved. Conversely, some excellent essays were accompanied by a very brief or cursory summary of the reflection sessions which had taken place, giving no real insight into the changes of direction, the refinement of response and research or the student's enthusiasm for his / her chosen topic.

In general, examiners noted that Criterion E offered a real opportunity to give value to the process of writing the EE, but observed that candidates lacked the skill set to clearly discuss their reflections about the process. Relatively few were seen at the highest level which offered a mature and academic reflection on the process and outcomes of their research. In specific terms, far too many candidates simply provided a diary of what they did and when, which not only failed to meet the second part of the criterion which required analytical thinking about the process which showed intellectual initiative, but also tended to suggest limited or partial engagement with the process.

As well as simply describing what their supervisor recommended, excuses for not making progress, changes of supervisor, even admissions of failure were not helpful. Likewise, describing largely the titles and topics which had been rejected before deciding on the chosen topic was also unnecessary. Learning about time management was the one thing most

mentioned, and also how useful the exercise would be for their university studies – which, while important for the student, was not a key discriminator for the marks awarded.

Some RPPFs were too short; others were in excess of the 500-word limit, which had a detrimental effect on marks awarded.

The RPPF mainly provides a sense of the student's "voice," which often reflected a sense of pride or relief in the accomplishment of writing the EE, but less commonly illustrated responses to challenges, development of skills, and particular decision making. Reflections that explored a specific aspect of the process - refining the question, crafting an outline, or reacting to feedback on a draft - were often more analytical.

The strongest RPPFs reflected a high degree of intellectual engagement, and how their thinking/ideas evolved throughout the process. Such candidates were able to recognise the journey they had undertaken and effectively enumerate the areas in which they had grown and developed.

Examiners felt that this was a telling criterion and offered a real bonus in assessing the candidate's engagement with the whole EE process. Sometimes candidates who did not score highly on the EE itself could still have a strong RPPF and vice-versa. The most effective RPPFs were those which demonstrated the candidate's motivation for the choice of topic, texts and his/her critical and intellectual growth throughout.

In summary, there was a vast difference in the proficiency of the RPPFs. Some students did not appear to appreciate their purpose and why so many marks are attributed to this criterion. In the future, students should be encouraged to take the RPPF much more seriously as a document which enables them to demonstrate the skills of reflection the whole IB curriculum has sought to develop.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

First and foremost, schools need to do their homework on key aspects of the new assessment criteria. The requirement for a literature review and three reflective statements which constitute the RPPF assessed for criterion E has clearly gone unnoticed by some, resulting in too many candidates being penalized for these oversights and omissions.

The need for a research question is clear in all EE documentation but again, some students, supervisors and schools do not seem to be using these materials effectively. As the formulation of the research question is now paramount, supervisors might advisedly spend time discussing what makes an appropriate scope.

Similarly, there were some (otherwise very good) essays where only the primary texts were cited and this did cost students a mark in the top mark band. According to the new rubric, focussing on the primary texts alone is no longer acceptable for students. This is a message which must be conveyed to supervisors and candidates.

Even more surprisingly, there were also too many centres where long-standing elements of the rubric were flouted. There were too many unsystematic essays (perhaps more than usual) based solely on a work in translation, so the penalty on criteria A, B and C made a significant difference to the overall mark awarded to otherwise very good essays.

Schools similarly do not seem to have got the message that Category 3 essays must be based on an identifiable text or texts, and not just a general discussion of an issue.

Category 3 papers which focused on a topic but not a text appeared to be more in keeping with the rubric for Group 2 Extended Essays - in some cases the topic was hard to understand as a Group 1 Language and Literature paper at all.

The loss of the abstract gave many candidates the opportunity to expand the main body of the essay so that all 4000 words were utilised for the main argument. Where included, very few abstracts added to either the academic presentation or content of the essay.

A disappointing number of candidates failed to upload an RPPF with the essay, or it was left blank, or only the supervisor's comments had been filled in. A few were handwritten and illegible because of poor quality file upload. Clearly the major message to schools here is that criterion E is a key component of the EE process and failure to submit a detailed RPPF will seriously disadvantage candidates. Some RPPFs were over the word count and this again affected the candidate's mark; in such cases, the examiner is directed to stop reading at 500 words, and so does not get as far as the candidate's summative reflection on the value of the task, or the final sense of skills acquired and academic achievement reached.

A few important matters:

- It would be very helpful for candidates to include as appendices copies of poems/song lyrics/graphic images/advertisements/speeches. Sometimes it is very difficult to find these based on the citation/bibliography listing provided.
- Not all essays are registered in the correct category. For instance, some comparative studies were incorrectly labelled as Category 2 when they were in fact Category 1 as both texts had originally been written in English.
- Some candidates are still having difficulty appreciating that Category 3 essays should be a study in language. Instead they want to write about "text in context" and connect this idea to something literary such as character development, which is more geared toward a Category 1 approach. Candidates who take this hybrid path end up writing papers that do not fulfil the requirements for either category and therefore do not score well.
- It is important for candidates and supervisors to read through the categories carefully to make sure that the topic and research question are following the guidelines.
- Many essays were short (around 3500 words or less – some were only just over 2,000 words). Students should be making full use of the word count available.
- Candidates should carefully proof-read essays before printing and/or upload, checking for typos, correct pagination, alphabetical ordering of the bibliography, and that all required details are on the title page including category and word count. They should not rely solely on the computer spelling and grammar checker as that does not

pick up everything.

- When quoting poetry, the lines should be set out as in the original, or slash marks used to indicate line breaks.
- Finally, but perhaps most usefully, candidates should be shown how to avoid what one examiner called "cut and paste plagiarism": supervisors have a key responsibility here.

Further comments

Many excellent essays had one evident flaw (perhaps a poor RPPF, or the lack of a literature review) which brought the final mark down.

With very poor essays, even though they might be less successful at analysis or creating an argument, all candidates should at least be able to gain marks for stating clearly the RQ and topic under investigation (A), following the IB guidelines for correct presentation (D), and using the full word count available to describe the decision-making and planning which had gone into the task (E).

It is obvious that some candidates suffered due to lack of supervision/guidance throughout the process, especially where they, and/or their supervisors, did not appear to be familiar with the detail of the new EE guide.