CHOOSING A TOPIC FOR RESEARCH

What are you going to research?
Sometimes choosing a topic is the biggest hurdle in doing research. While IB candidates are encouraged to discuss their choice of topics and research questions with their supervisor and the IB librarian at your school, the candidate must “decide on the topic and the research question and develop his/her own ideas” (IB Extended Essay, p. 6). Knowing where to look for ideas can facilitate your choice of a topic as well as provide you with background information and a list of keywords.

Where can you get ideas?
Your subject area interests—the things you have been reading, and conversations you have had in class or with others are often good sources of ideas. Think about the subject areas of the hexagon—which area interests you the most?
Sources of background information like general encyclopedias, subject-specific encyclopedias or textbooks can be sources of ideas.
Browsing the reference shelves in the library is also a good way to get an idea of topics that have intrigued authors. Use the handout on page 25 that lists all of the Dewey Decimal Classes to help you browse only the areas that relate to your subject needs. Notice that the handout divides the 10 main Dewey Classes into the second division. This will help you locate subject specific resources within a main class. The Dewey classes and divisions apply to the general non-fiction collection and the reference collection. Be aware that college and university libraries typically use the Library of Congress Classification System, and it differs from Dewey significantly.

What are your information requirements?
As you begin to get organized for research, you will also want to consider the type, quantity, and format of information you will need. Answering the following questions may help you organize your extended essay research:

- How long will my essay have to be? (Around 3900 words—no more than 4000)
- How much information do you need?
- Is currency important?
- What types of publications do you want to read? (newspaper articles, books, journal articles, diaries, trade publications, etc.)
- What formats do you need? (both print and online should be used)
- Is point of view an issue? Do you need opinions?
- How much time do you have? Are their due dates throughout the process?

What are the keywords that describe your topic?
Once you have identified your subject area, and you’ve completed some background reading, think about questions that your research might help you answer. State your topic as a question. Think about the significant terms, concepts, and keywords that describe your topic. These terms will become the keys for searching online catalogs and databases, the Internet, and print
Extended Essay Research

resources for information about your topic. See Appendix A (page 16) for additional tips on keywords and phrases

For Example:
  How did New Deal programs influence the arts in America?

Keywords
  New Deal
  United States / America { synonymous terms }
  Depression
  Art
  Federal Aid to the Arts { key words or phrases from background reading }

Work Space: Use this area to jot down key words, phrases and ideas as you begin to select your broad subject area.
Extended Essay Research

**Topics that are too narrow:** Think of parallel and broader associations for your subject if you need a broader topic that will be easier to research. Sometimes a topic may be too new and sources to your research questions may not yet exist.

For example, if you want to do a paper on the effect of deforestation on Colombia's long-term ability to feed its citizens, consider the following questions:

- Could you examine other countries or regions in addition to Colombia?
- Could you think more broadly about this topic? Give thought to wider topics like agriculture and sustainable development.
- Who are the key players in this topic? The government? Citizens? International organizations?
- What other issues are involved in this topic? For example, how can natural resources be allocated most economically to sustain the populace of Colombia?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Topic</th>
<th>What is the effect of deforestation on Colombia’s long-term ability to feed its citizens?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Focus</td>
<td>Agriculture, sustainable development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Place</td>
<td>South America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Person or Group</td>
<td>United Nations and its subgroups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Event or Aspect</td>
<td>Birth Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadened Topic</td>
<td>How can the United Nations encourage South American countries to employ sustainable development practices?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Tip:** You have likely narrowed your topic too severely if you cannot easily find resources.

**Work Space:** Practice narrowing your topic in the space below. Make several attempts—no one narrows a topic on the very first try.
- Locate the publications listed in the bibliography at the end of articles. These ready-made reading lists are sources that a published author used, and you may also find these same sources helpful for your research.

**PART IV: REFINING YOUR TOPIC**

Once you have read some background information, you can refine your broad research topic into a narrow, focused topic. The sooner you can develop a broad subject into a focused topic, the sooner you can shape your research into a finished paper. On the other hand, if you start out too focused or detailed, you may have a hard time finding enough sources to write an acceptable paper.

**Research Tip:** A topic is probably too broad if you can state it in four or five words. You can narrow a subject or topic by adding words that will eventually help you make a claim in your thesis statement or help you ask a question if you are developing a research question. Consider using words like conflict, description (describe), contribution (contribute), or development (develop). If you narrow a topic by using nouns derived from verbs, you will be one step closer to a claim that could be challenging enough to keep you and your evaluator interested.

**Narrowing a Subject to a Manageable Topic:** A topic that covers too much material is a common problem for students. Depending on your interests, a general topic can be focused in many ways. For example, if you want to write a paper on government funding for the arts, consider the following questions:

- What do you already know about this subject?
- Is there a specific time period that you want to cover?
- Is there a geographic region or country on which you would like to focus?
- Is there a particular aspect of this topic that interests you? For example, public policy implications, historical influence, sociological aspects, psychological angles, specific groups or individuals involved in the topic, etc.

Consider creating a table (or grid) to use as a template for narrowing your subject into a manageable topic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Subject</th>
<th>Government funding of the arts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Span</td>
<td>1930s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event or Aspects</td>
<td>New Deal, painting, art, artists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrowed Topic</td>
<td>Federal funding of artists through New Deal programs and the Works Progress Administration contributed to the country’s sense of well being during the Great Depression.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>