World religions: Subject-specific guidance

See also: *Extended essay guide* and *Extended essay teacher support material*

Overview

An extended essay (EE) in world religions gives students the opportunity to undertake an in-depth investigation into a topic of their choice within the subject of world religions.

The essay should integrate disciplined research informed by scholarly methods with original and imaginative analysis and critical evaluation of the results of that research.

About the subject

World religions comprises a systematic, critical, yet sensitive study of the variety of beliefs, values and practices encountered in religions around the world.

A rigorous attempt is made to maintain objectivity in the analysis and evaluation of religions. This requires, at the very least, an authentic attempt to understand the beliefs, values and practices of the religion being studied by using language and concepts drawn from that religious tradition.

The concern is not just with what the followers of a faith believe and do, but also with an understanding of why they do so, through an appreciation of the form of life and world outlook constituted by their actions and beliefs.

The result of writing an essay in world religions should be, among other things, improved intercultural understanding.

Students who are considering embarking on an EE in world religions are advised to study the subject's Diploma Programme syllabus. It gives a clear idea of the scope and content of the subject, and will help students to decide whether:

- their choice of topic is appropriate
- they have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the subject to meet the assessment criteria.

Choice of topic

Students may choose to answer any well-defined question about any of the world's religions, present or past, subject to the following guidelines.

The topic must be appropriate to the subject. EEs must address the beliefs, values and practices of religious traditions and show a genuine understanding of the religion from the standpoint of its adherents.

Topics that are only indirectly related to religion—eg legal issues relating to school prayer, the wearing of religious symbols or the scientific validity of "creation science"—are not acceptable.

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Students who have not followed a course in world religions should familiarize themselves with the discipline and its methodology before choosing a topic. For example, they could read an introductory text or study with a mentor who has significant background in the discipline. Local university departments of religious studies, or interdisciplinary humanities departments that include scholars of religion, may be able to help.

Specifically, students should note the following.

- An essay in world religions should avoid topics that involve making judgments about the truth value of religious beliefs. They should not be of a confessional, evangelical or apologetic nature.
- Essays should not be purely descriptive but should shed some light on why people believe and/or act as they do, or on the relationship between the religion and the broader social reality of which it is a part.
- Few religious traditions are monolithic, and so naive analyses of "Christianity" or "Buddhism" are unlikely to attain the depth necessary for an excellent EE. Students should be as specific as possible about exactly what they are studying.
- The research question should be well defined. Topics that are too broad nearly always result in essays that are superficial, purely descriptive and riddled with errors and misconceptions.
- The research question should permit investigation using a method or approach that students are capable of completing successfully, given their level of training and the time and resources available. In other words, students should not plan an essay that requires access to unobtainable or unreadable primary sources or a larger number of in-depth interviews than there is time to carry out.

The most successful essays generally:

- focus on the analysis or interpretation of a particular religious text, image, artifact, space, ritual or other practice, or
- examine the significance of a well-defined concept in a particular religious tradition or comparatively across two different religious traditions.

Examples of topics

These examples are just for guidance. Students must ensure their choice of topic is focused (left-hand column) rather than broad (right-hand column).

Focused topics	Broad topics
An examination of the differences between the way in which Muslim legal schools (*fiqh*) and contemporary Muslim scholars approach the question of *jihad* and the impact this has	Questioning whether the Quran supports terrorism
Factors leading to the adoption of Theravada Buddhism in many South-East Asian countries	The difference between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism
An examination of the reasons why fundamentalist Protestantism turned towards political activism in the 1970s in the USA	The Religious Right in America

Treatment of the topic

The first step in preparing an EE is to formulate a well-defined research question. The best questions are those that show that students are familiar with existing research and with the larger concerns of the discipline.

Research methods

Many methods of investigation are possible. Students might, for instance:

- analyse and interpret a sacred text, image or ritual
- analyse the role of a particular doctrine within one or more theological systems
- conduct in-depth interviews in order to understand how ordinary believers approach a particular religious belief or practice
- engage in participant observation of sacred spaces or religious practices.

Ethical guidelines

Students should obtain the permission of the leaders of religious communities before observing services and rituals.

They should also obtain the permission of anyone they interview, making it clear how the results will be used and how, if at all, the interviewees will be identified.

Sources

Students are encouraged to use both primary and secondary sources.

Secondary sources should be consulted in order to:

- locate students' topic within a broader context
- gain an understanding of various methods of investigation, analysis, interpretation and argument
- clarify the state of debate around the question.

The best essays generally test these established positions against primary sources or data collected for the EE.

Be cautious in using catechisms and encyclopedias

Catechisms should be used only as primary sources that provide evidence of the way doctrines are presented at the popular level. They are rarely definitive doctrinal statements and never scholarly studies.

Encyclopedias tend to summarize accepted scholarly results and often ignore or treat poorly the kind of disputed questions that make for a good EE. The more scholarly encyclopedias may be an exception, framing the "state of the question" with respect to a particular area of scholarship, but should only be a starting point, never a principal source.

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Interpreting primary sources

Supervisors should make sure that students have at least a basic grasp of the scholarly methods needed to interpret primary sources, for example:

- literary, source and historical-critical approaches to sacred texts
- formal and iconographic analysis of visual images
- various approaches to the interpretation of rituals.

Methods of investigation and analysis must be appropriate to the topic and be well executed.

Essays that contain naive analyses and interpretations that reflect no training and could have been prepared without any formal study will not receive high scores.

Interviews

- In-depth interviews are an excellent way of finding out how ordinary members of a religious community understand and experience their religion. However, students must ensure they conduct a significant number of interviews with a diverse cross-section of the population being studied.
- Interviews should not be used naively as a source regarding the "official teachings" of a religious institution: simply supplementing readings of secondary sources with a few interviews with local clergy accomplishes very little.

Comparative studies

Comparisons between well-defined aspects of two or more different religions are permissible, but students must take great care to ensure that the comparisons are:

- genuine, clear and specific
- a manifestation of sensitive and objective analysis.

Comparison in religious studies means the comparing of ideas or practices, not the making of value judgments such as "Buddhist meditation is more effective than Christian prayer".

Comparison is made more difficult because religions tend to pose different questions rather than offer competing answers to the same questions.

Should the student or the supervisor have any doubts about the student's ability in these areas, a comparative study should be avoided.

Writing the essay

The results of the investigation, analysis and interpretation should be presented in the form of a well-written, well-organized argument that supports a clear and well-defined answer to the research question. Logical links and relationships between ideas should be spelled out.

The conclusions should show an understanding of the wider implications of the research.

Visual materials

The use of materials such as drawings, pictures and photographs should be encouraged where they appropriately illustrate the discussion or argument. These should be included in the essay in a way that makes the intended point, and this point should be spelled out clearly in the analysis, interpretation and argument. When such materials are derived from another source, that source must be acknowledged.

Examples of topics, research questions and suggested approaches

Once students have identified their topic and written their research question, they can decide how to research their answer. They may find it helpful to write a statement outlining their broad approach. These examples are for guidance only.

Topic	**Islamism: differences between al-Qaeda and ISIS**
Research question	What are the differences between al-Qaeda and ISIS with respect to the Caliphate?
Approach	A comparative analysis of documents from the two organizations, situated in the context of a review of the existing literature on the question.

Topic	**Spiritual but not religious**
Research question	What do people mean when they say that they are spiritual but not religious?
Approach	A series of in-depth interviews using a well-structured interview protocol exploring the meaning of spiritual and religion among those who say they are spiritual and religious, spiritual but not religious, and neither, situated in the context of a review of the existing literature on the question.

Topic	**An examination of tantric traditions**
Research question	Why do most tantric traditions make their teachings accessible only by oral transmission from teacher to student?
Approach	A study of the relevant tantras and secondary texts by both teachers within these traditions and scholars of these traditions, supplemented by in-depth interviews with teachers and practitioners.

Topic	**Women's ordination: an examination of resistance in some religious traditions**
Research question	Why are some religious traditions more resistant to the ordination of women than to comparable or more senior degrees of leadership in the secular arena?

Approach	A reading of ecclesial and theological texts addressing the question of women's ordination in the light of feminist (and non-feminist) approaches to religion and gender.

Topic	**Experiencing sacred images**
Research question	How does iconoclasm (the rejection of making images of God) affect the experience of the sacred?
Approach	In-depth interviews of believers in an iconoclastic and a non-iconoclastic tradition exploring their experience of the sacred situated in the context of a review of the existing literature on the question.

An important note on "double-dipping"

Students must ensure that their EE does not overlap significantly with any other work they are submitting for the Diploma Programme.

The world religions EE and internal assessment

In particular, the EE is not an extension of the internal assessment (IA) task. Students must ensure that they understand the differences between the two.

- The EE is longer (4,000 as opposed to 1,800 words).
- The expectation is therefore of a more complex and complete investigation, which is evaluated across a much wider range of criteria, including the quality of the question, mastery of the intellectual context, and the appropriateness of the research method as well as the quality of the analysis, argument, writing and formal presentation.

Supervisors play an important role here in guiding students on these distinctions. Students risk their diploma if academic misconduct is detected.

Interpreting the EE assessment criteria

Criterion A: Focus and method

(Strands: Topic, Research question, Methodology)

In terms of the choice of topic, the research question must be specific and sharply focused and stated clearly in the introduction of the essay. It should be formulated as a question, not a statement or proposition for discussion. Students should frame a question in which the investigation of one or more religious phenomena plays a central role. Religion cannot be merely a peripheral dimension of the investigation.

The question should not be framed in a way that leads to an answer that is primarily confessional or polemical (ie an attempt to defend or critique specific religious beliefs).

Acceptable questions include:

- questions that involve the interpretation of the significance of religious beliefs or practices within a tradition
- questions of a comparative nature
- questions that explore the relationship between religion and other social phenomena (so long as the understanding of the religious aspect in question is a significant part of the task).

To gain the highest marks, the question must require the student to show an understanding of the state of research regarding the topic in the field of world religions and relevant related disciplines.

The methods chosen should be appropriate to the question and reflect an understanding of research methods. For example:

- a question concerning the meaning of a particular concept in the sacred scriptures of a tradition should use exegetical and hermeneutic methods
- a question about the significance of a concept in popular belief and practice might use in-depth interviews
- a question about theological or philosophical arguments regarding a religious issue might be based primarily on an examination of classical and contemporary scholars' views on the issue.

Finally, the question should be significant but also of a scope that can be meaningfully addressed within the word limit. This excludes questions to which the answers are obvious or involve simply the collection and reporting of information that is already well known and acceptable. It also excludes questions that are so broad as to require a book-length work to treat them meaningfully (such as a global comparison of all religious traditions, even on one question, much less on several).

Criterion B: Knowledge and understanding

(Strands: Context, Subject-specific terminology and concepts)

Since world religions is a field engaged by many disciplinary perspectives, the subject area or discipline in which the work is situated may vary. For example:

- scriptural exegesis and interpretation
- history of religions
- social-scientific study of religions
- philosophical or theological reflection on religious questions.

Students should show that they know which discipline they are writing within, understand its approach and are familiar with existing knowledge of the topic. They should show knowledge of the "state of the question".

If students are examining the topic from the perspective of more than one discipline, they must say that they are doing so and explain what each discipline is contributing to addressing the question.

For higher marks, the student should demonstrate correct use and understanding of discipline-specific:

- terms
- methods
- modes of analysis, interpretation and evaluation.

Criterion C: Critical thinking

(Strands: Research, Analysis and Discussion and evaluation)

Students should avoid presenting essays that are merely descriptive or narrative in character. This can be a challenge because students researching a religious tradition other than their own may find a great deal of what seems like new and interesting descriptive material, but the expectations of the EE go beyond this.

There should be appropriate analysis of the descriptive or factual material gathered. This might involve the use of:

- historical critical methods of scriptural exegesis
- statistical analysis of survey results
- qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews
- philosophical or theological analysis of arguments regarding questions in those disciplines.

The essay should take and defend a position, making an argument for the position taken and defending it in response to counter-arguments.

The essay should demonstrate some understanding of the significance of the research for the field or discipline and identify questions for further exploration.

Criterion D: Presentation

(Strands: Structure, Layout)

This criterion relates to the extent to which the essay conforms to accepted academic standards in relation to how research papers should be presented. It also relates to how well these elements support the reading, understanding and evaluation of the essay.

Students may provide a section and sub-section structure to their essays, with informative headings. sub-headings should not distract from the overall structure of the essay or argument presented.

Use of charts, images and tables

Any charts, images or tables from literature sources included in the essay must be carefully selected and labelled. They should only be used if they are directly relevant to the research question, contribute towards the understanding of the argument and are of a good graphic quality. Only selected materials that are central to the argument of the essay should be included in the body of the essay, as close as possible to its first reference.

Students must take care in their use of appendices as examiners are not required to read them.

All information with direct relevance to the analysis, discussion and evaluation of the essay must be contained in the main body of the essay.

Students should use standard methods of citing religious texts. Quotes from sacred scriptures, for example, should be by book, chapter and verse (John 1:5), or by sura, sutra or other traditional division, and not by page number. Translations and editions used should be indicated in the bibliography.

Any material that is not original must be carefully acknowledged, with specific attention paid to the acknowledgment and referencing of quotes and ideas. This acknowledgment and referencing is applicable to audio-visual material, text, graphs and data published in print and electronic sources. If the referencing does not meet the minimum standard as indicated in the guide (name of author, date of publication, title of source and page numbers as applicable), and is not consistently applied, work will be considered as a case of possible academic misconduct.

A bibliography is essential and has to be presented in a standard format. Title page, table of contents, page numbers, etc must contribute to the quality of presentation.

The essay must not exceed 4,000 words of narrative. Students should be aware that examiners will not read beyond the 4,000-word limit, nor assess any material presented thereafter.

Criterion E: Engagement

(Strands: Reflections on planning and progress)

This criterion assesses the student's engagement with their research focus and the research process. It will be applied by the examiner at the end of the assessment of the essay, after considering the student's *Reflections on planning and progress Form* (RPPF).

Students are expected to provide reflections on the decision-making and planning process undertaken in completing the essay. Students must demonstrate how they arrived at a topic as well as the methods and approach used. This criterion assesses the extent to which a student has evidenced the rationale for decisions made throughout the planning process and the skills and understandings developed.

For example, students may reflect on:

- the approach and strategies they chose, and their relative success
- the *Approaches to learning* skills they have developed and their effect on the student as a learner
- how their conceptual understandings have developed or changed as a result of their research
- setbacks they faced in their research and how they overcame these
- questions that emerged as a result of their research
- what they would do differently if they were to undertake the research again.

Effective reflection highlights the journey the student has engaged in through the EE process. Students must show evidence of critical and reflective thinking that goes beyond simply describing the procedures that have been followed.

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The reflections must provide the examiner with an insight into **student** thinking Students should be aware that examiners will not read beyond the 4,000-word limit, nor assess any material presented thereafter.