

Theatre Arts

Range and suitability of work submitted

One exciting thing of the Extended Essays in Theatre Arts is that there is no real predicting either what will turn up, or what will work... That said it's sadly always predictable that those students (and supervisors) who somehow take the subject actually to be the generic 'Performing Arts' rather than 'Theatre' and submit essays on dance, on television, on cinema, are doomed to disappointment. Those who are writing thinly disguised literature or history or social science essays will also have problems. It's worth referring right at the beginning of the process to the criteria, especially Criterion K which asks how well the students have related their research findings to the practice of theatre - this is crucial.

But equally, there are wild and wonderful and unpredictable successes, usually driven by a particular interest - this seems indispensable for the really excellent essays, and almost enough to lift any essay out of the routine, given some sympathetic supervision.

There were also the same unfathomable patterns - why should Appia and Artaud suddenly become so fashionable? Why did the history of stage design suddenly become so interesting? What happened to all those essays on 'Oklahoma'? These patterns don't seem even to be relatable to recent stage successes or countries or events.

There has been a distinct increase in the number of essays that tackle quite difficult issues, particularly the various functions or roles of theatre in different societies - these are welcome, and credit is always given to students who want to go beyond the more mundane / summary-based topics, even if they may find it hard. These kinds of essays often provoke serious thought, and some wrestling with really complex basic issues - and this is a large part of the function of the Extended Essay.

Candidate performance against each criterion

General assessment criteria

Criterion A Research question

It cannot be over-emphasized how absolutely crucial the framing of the Research Question is. There are always many essays in which one can see what must have been a real and manageable topic, which has been diverted by a badly phrased RQ into a history or literature, or even unanswerable, endeavour. It is very well worth trying to phrase the topic as a question that can be answered, and *actually envisaging what form the answer might take*, before you start. With that established as a basis, the candidate could explore other 'looser' options and directions, whilst keeping that starting point in mind as a constant reference point.

Criterion B Approach to the research question

There are many many options here, but candidates should carefully consider before they really start, just what all the options for approaches are (summary of secondary sources, surveys, interviews, action, research, performance...) and what information is *needed* - not just what information may be available.

Criterion C Analysis/interpretation

Analysis seems to be often tackled fairly competently now - candidates can look at their material and think about what it means or implies. Interpretation, and especially a little thought about the reliability or worth of sources, is still lagging.

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Criterion D Argument/evaluation

This again is almost completely dependent on getting the Research Question right in the first place. Where there is a clear question or issue, then the argument can consider it and work to a conclusion; where there is not, the essays meander around the topic, usually in the form of a set of statements - often actually just assertions - which have no structure.

Criterion E Conclusion

Again - the vital importance of the Research Question that predisposes the conclusion to be an answer in some form. In the weaker essays the conclusion still falls into the trap of being a summary of all that has been said, rather than seeing what the information / observations have lead to. It is also very useful for candidates here to put their final thoughts into some context - where were they limited or constrained? What would they change? What flaws were there?

Criterion F Abstract

These were generally adequate - and once one sees that there must be 1) a statement of the Research Question, 2) a description of the scope (what ground the investigation covered) and 3) a conclusion, then there is no reason why all candidates shouldn't get maximum points here. But they don't.

Criterion G Formal Presentation

This has tended to improve year on year, as candidates see the importance and use of this. It's a very very helpful protection for them with the problem of plagiarism still lurking. The helpfulness of illustration in Theatre Arts essays in particular is still worth thought - but a helpful tip is to consider that the point of including any diagram or picture should be explained.

Criterion H Holistic judgment

There was often clear evidence of personal engagement and that was always pleasant to see. Some of the topics chosen had become frankly eccentric rather than personal, and that does need thought - and help from the supervisor. This is also a point where the degree of initiative and ambition can be rewarded, and the supervisor's comments cast a strong light on that.

Subject specific assessment criterion

Criterion J Personal point of view based on thorough knowledge of the theatrical aspects of the topic

This is a rather odd criterion - the personal points of view often emerged quite clearly; there was often uncertainty about theatrical aspects - candidates do need to relate what they feel or believe to the theatre, rather than any other set of interests or prejudices.

Criterion K Effect of research findings on the practice of the theatre form investigated

This has almost always been the weakest area of performance - candidates may do a creditable job of describing the history of a theatre form or the development of a theorist's ideas, but then fail to connect it to *what actually happens in a theatre* as result of what is discovered or described.

Criterion L Historical/socio-cultural context of the argument/evaluation

This generally has improved, as candidates seem to have been encouraged actually to take conscious note of this criterion. It's valuable for candidates to think of how their ideas / results / conclusions are dependent on a particular framework or even set of assumptions about what theatre 'is' or is assumed to be - how would they look differently at what they say if they were members of a completely different society? This is often helpfully linked to the conclusion, but can usefully inform all their research and argument.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

These seem to be eternal verities. Make sure the students have read all the Criteria and understand how their essays will be marked before they start. Make sure candidates have their own copies of the Criteria for reference. Always ask the student how their essay will fit the Criteria (especially the

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Subject - specific criteria) right from the start. Give them copies of the last three examiners reports. The absolutely crucial step is helping them frame the Research Question and imagining what form the 'answer' will take. A very useful question during the process is 'so what?' - to keep them thinking how their work is meant to be working towards a conclusion. Enjoy the excitement of students actually investigating something that they are enthused about and commit to - that shared interest keeps them going.