
EXTENDED ESSAY REPORTS – MAY 2004

Visual Arts

Range and suitability of work submitted

The most successful essays were well focused and often involved local topics and questions, visits to the site of the study, engagement with original art works, original visual analysis, and interviews with people directly involved with the area of study. In contrast to those essays entirely researched in the library, with no primary sources consulted, these original, probing, opinionated and fresh essays exhibited a high level of personal engagement.

We are amazed that, in a subject named Visual Arts, there were still some essays submitted that lacked any visual material or visual analysis! Illustrations at the end of the essay are not as appropriate as in the body of the text where they can be referenced and commented upon. In some cases it was gratifying to see candidates photographing the local examples needed for visual documentation and discussion

As outlined below, candidates showed enthusiasm and imagination in searching out and selecting topics but, in many instances, less skill in formulating a research question. There remain too many candidates struggling with unwieldy topics, e.g. *The variation within perception amongst human beings*, or *Architecture: Art with a purpose*. Such essays form a strong contrast to an essay such as: *The amount of creativity possible in traditional Indian Mehndi art and in contemporary American Mehndi art*, where a resourceful candidate conducted much of her research interviewing Mehndi artists by e-mail.

There are still too many biographical essays. As one examiner in the past commented: "The 10% of candidates addicted to Dali seldom find personal insights along this well-trodden path." Unfortunately the largest category [of essays] was still the familiar Western Art studies; Van Gogh, Frieda Kahlo this time, as a predictable result of the new movie on her, entirely researched in the library, [or internet] with no primary resources consulted. The conclusions were utterly predictable and found in any good art book. I wish we could discourage these tedious, routine essays. However, we are beginning to encounter a larger number (still not very large) of finely researched essays, using local primary resources, visits to the site of the subject of the essay, using local primary resources, visits to the site of the subject of the essay and interviews with people directly involved with the area of the study. Freshness of observation, and the opportunity to make verbal contact, enlivens and enhances any essay. There is little point to simply regurgitating second hand information and impressions about a well-known artist.

Although not an overall problem, some essays exceed the 4000 word count. A number of abstracts exceeded the 300-word limit.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A Research question

Despite advice that it is always a good idea to frame the title of the essay in the form of a question, there are still a number of essays that had a "topic," but no research question. In others, although mentioned in the abstract or title, the question still got lost in the body of the essay. Sometimes the scope of the question is too broad.

Students need to realize that they are not writing a "report," they are responding to a research question. Inevitably, those essays that do not foreground the question seem to end up as purely descriptive essays, with little discursive analysis. As recommended on previous occasions, within a large field (e.g. "surrealism," "graffiti," or "Islamic architecture"), candidates should seek a focused and original research

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question. There are still essays submitted with trivial research questions – to which the answers are already well documented. The key to a successful essay is narrowing down the question. A few candidates submit quite short essays and did not take advantage of the number of words available to develop their argument.

Criterion B Approach to the research question

Not all students are clear as to what evidence is appropriate, or how to analyse and appraise it. Students and their supervisors need to be aware that historical or biographical narrative approaches are probably not going to answer the research question. More critical commentary is needed. Some students need to become more familiar with critical approaches through which they might compare and contrast the views of different critics and writers.

Criterion C Analysis/interpretation

There is usually an attempt to analyse/interpret, but often there is little attempt to place the evidence in context or to compare, particularly if there are different views. Some students confuse description and analysis. They need to support their own interpretations through reference to visual evidence, expert opinion, etc.

Criterion D Argument/evaluation

Arguments and evaluation need to be clearly referenced. The use of subheadings to show the structure of the essay may help some students. To whose voice does the text belong? In general, despite having a research question clearly stated “up-front,” too many of the essays lacked an argument. In the past one examiner remarked that “Candidates whose own studio practice enables them to make informed judgment about the nature of works studied bring an acuity of perception which is particularly pleasing and this was observed in [refreshing] essays on Diane Arbus and Jackson Pollock.”

Criterion E Conclusion

Again, the best conclusions pulled any disparate threads into a clear summary, addressed the research question/s identified at the beginning of the essay, and acknowledged any unresolved and problematic aspects. The conclusions to many essays did not pose unresolved questions and admit limitations in the nature of the research. Students who do a good job with both the conclusion and the abstract, tend to also perform well against most other criteria.

Criterion F Abstract

Good teaching is immediately apparent in those essays where candidates demonstrate a sound ability to précis argument, ideas and information. The abstract should be distinct from the introduction to the essay. It is not simply an introduction. In some cases the abstract served only as an elaboration of the research question without giving the reader much sense of the argument and “findings” of the essay. Abstracts must mention the conclusion/s reached.

Criterion G Formal presentation

As might be expected in the visual arts, formal presentation is usually quite well done, but still with one major exception. Despite advice given over the past few years, some students still do not identify the sources of their visuals (i.e. where they found them). Also, some students are far too reliant on only one print or Internet source for their visuals.

Criterion H Holistic judgment

The essays that scored highly on this general criterion are well focused and often involve local topics and questions, included considerable original visual analysis, made use of interviews and/or personal observation, and exhibited overall a high level of original and personal engagement.

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Subject assessment criteria

Criterion J Personal point of view based on through knowledge of the visual arts aspects of the chosen topic

Although most essays revealed a personal point of view, students need to realize that their points of view need to be convincingly supported and justified by written and visual evidence.

Criterion K Use of appropriate sources

As a major source the Internet has gained increasing popularity. Books and journals are also extensively used. The point is to use a range of sources, (including some primary resources) and to choose a research question that can be answered with available sources. For most research questions, use of the Internet as a sole source of reference is problematic. Often it is impossible to find some URLs and check on the author's research. Some students use Internet sources that are not academic and that amount to little more than one person's opinion. These are not appropriate sources, but students (and by implication their advisers) seem unaware of this. For example, it would not be appropriate to use images of Australian aboriginal boomerangs from a tourist craft shop site as examples of "sacred artifacts with deep spiritual meaning"!

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

Many students find it difficult to contextualise their studies. Except in the very best essays historical/social/cultural context is sometimes treated rather superficially. Candidates need to ask more "why" questions. Sometimes essays were artificially expanded by use of unnecessary historical background (in some cases by many pages with little relevance to the research question). Historical pointers should be significant and to the point.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

It remains disturbing that in over 50% of the essays marked, no teacher/mentor comments were recorded. We would like to see more evidence of supervisors functioning as mentors. For example, early on, supervisors should review each of the required assessment criteria with candidates. Other than documenting an hour or two that they spent with a candidate, many supervisors wrote nothing on the inside covers of the essays. It is always disheartening to witness enthusiastic, industrious candidates let down by inadequate skills in the strategies of discussion, argument, and the resolution of ideas. Candidates' ability to exercise such skills is the responsibility of teachers and supervisors and it is sad to see this responsibility so frequently neglected."

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Supervisors could provide guidance in the following areas:

- School supervisors should review each of the required assessment criteria with candidates early in the IB diploma course. (As stated above, even such simple matters as word count need to be clearly understood).
- Approaches to text referencing. (In some schools this was impeccable, while in others candidates appeared to have received little guidance).
- The need to include visual evidence and the need to identify the published sources from which this is derived.
- Selection of suitable research questions. Encourage the choice of a question that requires students to go out into “the field” to track down some primary resources. Discourage all essays written primarily from library books or Internet resources.
- Developing appropriate research methods. Warn your students that “Google” is not the definitive authority on every subject!
- The need for the research question/s to be clearly identified at the beginning of the essay, not lost sight of in the middle, and returned to in the conclusion.
- Organizing their material, suggesting use of subheadings, etc.
- Encourage the student to:
 - Proofread and edit the essay.
 - Have someone else read it to see if it makes sense.
 - Use, but not totally rely on “Spell Check.”
- And, supervisors, it really helps if you are able to write a report for each student!