Writing and reflection

John Cannings provides examples of the type of reflection that is required for the extended essay.

The extended essay (EE) is extremely rewarding, as it allows you to research a topic that is of interest to you, and is challenging due to the nature of the research process. It is important to choose a topic that is of personal interest, as this helps motivation and perseverance with the task. Although the EE does not have to cover a subject that you are studying, few students who follow this path get high grades.

There are a number of expectations about writing the EE. Have a development of previous requirements. Of prime importance is your ability, with the support of your essay supervisor, to develop a clear research question that fits within the essay’s subject area. This should be the focus of the essay and you must take some time and research to reframe into a clear and manageable question.

The new requirements for the EE put more emphasis on critical thinking, in other words:

- Choosing appropriate investigative methods and analytical tools
- Being able to draw conclusions based on the results of your analysis

In addition, you will be expected to reflect on and evaluate the research process in the reflections on planning and progress form (RPPF) after three formal reflection sessions with your supervisor. You need to ensure that you follow the process indicated in Figure 1. If writing your extended essay if you were to be successful.

Refrine a clear research question (50)
Research question is focused on and pursued throughout the essay

Research methods are appropriate to answering the question

Appropriate form of analysis for the subject and evaluation of process

Engagement with the research process as indicated in three reflection sessions

Essay is your own work

Figure 1. Process diagram for a successful extended essay.

EE assessment criteria

There have been some significant changes in the weighting of marks recently, with much more emphasis on your ability to analyse and evaluate your own work than was the case in earlier versions of the extended essay. A summary of the marking allocations are found below:

Criterion A: Focus and method (6 marks)
The criterion looks at how well your research question is focused and how that focus is sustained throughout the essay. It also considers the method of investigation.

Criterion B: Knowledge and understanding (6 marks)
The criterion considers how well the research question relates to the discipline you are writing in. It also considers use of language and concepts of the discipline.

Criterion C: Critical thinking (12 marks)
The criterion assesses how well you have carried out the research, analysed findings, and evaluated the process of research.

Criterion D: Formal presentation of the essay (4 marks)
The criterion considers how well you have organised your essay, and whether you have followed the requirements for a formal piece of academic writing.

Criterion E: Engagement with the research process (6 marks)
The criterion assesses the quality of your reflection, about the research process, on the RPPF.

Researcher’s reflection space

The researcher’s reflection space (RRS) can be any format, such as your EE file in Managebey, on your website or within a blog. In this space you should record the research process, possibly including questions that you have about your topic, investigative techniques, and books, articles and podcasts that you find useful. It should also include your notes and comments from the three reflection sessions. The RRS can be a valuable stimulus for the three compulsory reflection sessions.

Writing the essay

Choosing the topic

You should choose a topic that interests you from a subject that you are studying. The example essay that I have chosen is taken from the subject of geography. The topic focuses on gender issues in Switzerland and the status of women in financial institutions there, as women’s status is part of the study of changing population that is a key part of the core of the geography course. The general topic selected by the student then becomes slowly refined as some research is done. The supervisor helps clarify their thoughts in discussions they have about the topic.

From topic to research question

Women’s status in Switzerland

- What political rights do Swiss women have?
- What rights do Swiss women have to own land?
- What role do Swiss women play in the economy?
- What recognition is there for Swiss sportswomen?

Women in the Swiss economy

- What are the main occupations of women in the Swiss economy?
- How many Swiss women are the executive members of Swiss companies?
- Are there legal requirements for equal opportunity employment policies?

Factors affecting Swiss women’s economic status

- How does a woman’s fertility affect her ability to be a member of a company’s executive?
- How does a woman’s marital status affect her ability to become a member of a company’s executive?
- Potential research question: in what ways has a woman’s fertility affected her position in a Swiss financial company?

The first reflection session

This is your chance to demonstrate to your supervisor that some research has been undertaken. It is important that notes and thoughts collated about the topic are in the RRS for this meeting. You should prepare a short presentation for this and share your RRS with your supervisor. In this meeting the supervisor should ask some questions about the suitability of the topic and make some suggestions about refining the research question and possible avenues of investigation. You must take some notes of this meeting (and the subsequent two meetings), then write your first reflection. Below is an example of a reflection that could be written on the essay topic of women’s status in Swiss financial institutions:

My supervisor thinks that I have found some interesting published data and information on the employment of female executives and the way that having a family may have influenced their career path. From my discussion with Frau Bruner at ZKB Bank, it looks as though very few women with
large families make it to the top in Swiss companies. They tend to progress as far as middle management, but not to the executive level. I think this will be the focus of my research as I continue to read published materials to address my title question.

This first reflection should be around 100-150 words in length. After the first formal reflection session you should be ready to finalize your research question, if this hasn’t been done beforehand.

Using your TOK skills
You can use your TOK skills to help plan and carry out the research for the process of writing the IE. Take the knowledge framework from TOK that is appropriate to the subject the essay is going to be written in and use it to help plan the research. Below is an example, using the knowledge framework for the human sciences (focusing specifically on geography).

Scope/application
The topic is definitely related to the study of geography. As a result of the research I hope to make a generalised statement about the factors affecting women’s employment.

Language
The topic will be using language appropriate to geography. I shall be using key terms such as ‘fertility’. I might also be using mathematical terms such as ‘irrelevance’ in this essay.

Methodology
I shall be using research methods appropriate for the human sciences by carrying out surveys and possibly interviews. A key issue that I might face is the size of my sample. I shall use statistical tests to see if correlations exist between variables.

Historical development
The use of published data from government sources will provide context for the historical data. The use of questionnaires and interviews are techniques historically used in geography to obtain primary data.

Links to personal knowledge
I am interested in finding out how far women can progress in the financial industry. My mother has worked at a Swiss bank for 12 years.

Knowledge questions
How do we decide which questions are relevant to us being able to answer the research question?

Using your TOK skills should help clarify what you are trying to research and how to undertake the research.

The second reflection session
The preparation for this reflection session is important because you should be clearer about the following aspects:
- The final research question, e.g. in what ways does a woman’s fertility affect her position in a Swiss bank?
- The content for the essay, e.g. a member of a Swiss bank has offered to allow the student to carry out interviews and surveys with employees.

They are also able to access historical data showing the number of female executives in the Swiss bank over the past 10 years. Research had been done on Swiss employment laws and regulations as preparation for this meeting.

The methodology of the research
- What published data can be used/collected?
- What will be the size of the survey?
- How will it be conducted?
- What type of questions will be asked — open-ended?
- How are the results of secondary and primary research to be analysed?
- How will the results be presented?

The second reflection should also be around 100-150 words in length. Be aware that ‘analysing’ means explaining your results, not just describing them — a fault in many extended essays.

Completing the draft
Having collected your results and analysed them, now is the time to write a draft. You need to follow the basic structure of the essay and presentation that is recommended by the IB. You are expected to have a title page, list of contents, an introduction, an explanation of your inquiry methodology, analysis, a conclusion and evaluation of methods. There should be a bibliography and appendices for information such as tables, formulae and questionnaires that don’t need to be included in the main body of the essay.

In this draft essay, it is also important that sources are referenced and a standard form of referencing is used throughout. Please ensure that the draft is backed up. If possible, the draft should go through software such as Turnitin to ensure there is no unintended plagiarism.

Getting feedback
Your IB supervisor is expected to give you feedback on your draft essay. The feedback is usually about the content and presentation of the essay. Feedback may relate to how well the criteria have been met and what could be done to improve this.

Timeframe of the research and writing
- When will the secondary research process be completed?
- When will the survey and interviews be carried out?
- When will the writing process be completed?

This reflection session should be a golden opportunity for you to clarify your thoughts and ensure that the research is heading in the right direction. Your supervisor may wish to look at your IRS and your bibliography to date.

It is important that you take some notes of the meeting and reflect again after the meeting. This reflection is about being self-critical of your own research. Here is an example of reflection after the second reflection session:

My supervisor thought that my research question was clear, but felt that my questionnaire needed to be redesigned and that I should include some open-ended questions. I have redesigned it and am now ready to trial it again, before carrying out the survey. My questionnaire has been made on Survey Monkey. I shall send out the survey in June just before the summer break and I hope to get 60% replies from the 150 women I want to survey. This should be an adequate sample. The appropriate statistical test for analysing data will be Pearson’s product moment correlation.

The review
The final reflection is the third and final reflection session, and will occur after the essay has been submitted. This is an opportunity to present the successes and failures of the essay. It is suggested that you focus on five things in this presentation:
- The clarity of the research question.
- The effectiveness of the investigation (how could this have been done even better?)
- Strengths and weaknesses of the analysis.
- Whether or not the research question has been answered successfully.
- Possible future areas of research that have been identified as a result of the research.

This final reflection session provides you with an opportunity to fully evaluate what has been done. The supervisor may well have questions about how you have carried out the research and some informal evaluation of your work. The final reflection should be based on the notes taken from this, and really stress how you have evaluated your research.

An example of a final reflection might be:

My research question helped me to focus the inquiry into the topic. Gender issues have been one of the most fascinating parts of my geography course and this was the main reason for my research. Reports that I got from the Swiss Bankers Association and documents that I received from women’s business groups really helped to develop potential research questions. However, it took some time to finally refine a research question. To get data on factors affecting women’s status, I decided to distribute a questionnaire using Survey Monkey. The questionnaire I designed was ambiguous in some places in the wording even after doing a trial run and revising it. Some more open-ended questions would have gained more relevant information. The sample size could have been larger to get more accurate results or I could have distributed it before people went on holiday. However, I felt my analysis was sound but could have drawn out more points. While I was able to answer my research question, the process revealed more issues to be investigated. It would have been interesting to interview one of the executive members of the bank to get their opinion about promotion processes and opportunities within the bank. My supervisor was very helpful and supportive, helping me to clarify my ideas.

The final reflection should be around 200-250 words. In total, the three reflections must not exceed 500 words on the RPPF. The IB rules stipulate that you will not be allowed to rewrite previous reflections once each reflection is submitted to your supervisor on the RPPF.

Your supervisor should:
- give you a copy of the assessment criteria and subject guide for your essay.
- be knowledgeable about the subject area and provide suggestions about possible sources of information.
- have three reflection sessions with you.
- provide feedback on the full draft of the essay.

You must carefully consider about how you have conducted the research process on the RPPF.

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