

Film Overview

An extended essay in film provides students with an opportunity to undertake an in-depth investigation into a topic of particular interest to them. Students are encouraged to engage in diligent, serious, personal research, and to develop and explore in a disciplined and imaginative way an area of study specifically appropriate to film or television.

Moving images are part of the everyday international currency of information and entertainment. Audiences everywhere, young and old alike, respond with increasing sophistication to the ways that stories and messages are presented. Complex skills are involved in the interpretation and enjoyment of film, but critical understanding of how images tell stories, create emotional responses and give information is less widely developed.

The study of film in an international context also allows students to broaden their vision of film culture beyond the dominance of Hollywood or popular network television images, in keeping with the spirit of intercultural understanding promoted by the IB.

Choice of topic

The first and most critical stage in preparing for the extended essay is the choice of a suitable topic and students need appropriate guidance in making their final choice. The topic for an extended essay in film must be one that clearly focuses on film (or television) rather than another subject area. For instance, a study of film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays or of classic novels must not become an essay about the plays or the novels from a purely literary point of view, instead of a discussion about the films from a filmic point of view.

The scope of the topic and the framing of the research question must be given careful consideration. The topic needs to offer enough scope to provide material for a substantial essay without being too general. It needs to be one that captures the interest and enthusiasm of the student. Establishing a topic, however, is not enough. The essay also needs to have a sharp focus within the topic and the student has to be perfectly clear about the following issues.

- What important question about the topic will the essay answer?
- What major arguments or points of view about the topic will be developed or proven in the course of the essay?
- What needs to be said about the topic?
- What will the reader be led to understand about it?
- How might the ideas discussed be supported by evidence?
- What evidence will be appropriate?

Students should avoid developing ideas around the topic and research questions that have been addressed fully in earlier academic studies unless they propose to examine existing views and argue against them to a greater or lesser degree. Earlier studies must be used as a basis for discussion and not be merely replicated.

Students should be firmly advised to avoid topics that are:

- mainly dependent upon summarizing secondary sources
- likely to lead to approaches that are essentially narrative or descriptive
- too general and not well focused
- more appropriate to other subject areas.

Students should check very carefully, before embarking on a topic, that they have sufficient sources to support a substantial essay and that they have access to these sources when they need them. Early planning is essential.

Please note: Students who are taking the Diploma Programme film course must exercise care in selecting the material for their extended essay to ensure that it does not overlap significantly with any other work the student is preparing to submit for examination. The extended essay should not be based, for instance, on the same films the student has studied for the independent study assessment or for the presentation.

The following examples of titles for film extended essays are intended as guidance only. The pairings illustrate that focused topics (indicated by the first title) should be encouraged rather than broad topics (indicated by the second title).

- "A comparison of the treatment and depiction of the family in the films of Satyajit Ray and mainstream Hindi films" is better than "The role of the family in Indian cinema".
- "The contribution of Nino Rota's composition to the films of Fellini (or Morricone–Leone, Williams–Lucas)" is better than "Effective composer–director relationships".
- "Goddess and vampire: two female archetypes in Hollywood cinema" is better than "Women in film".

- “The continuation and extension of silent film comedy in the films of Jacques Tati” is better than “The comedy of Jacques Tati”.

Treatment of the topic

Clarity, coherence of ideas and attention to detail are all necessary to achieve an effective treatment of a film topic in an extended essay. To ensure a suitable treatment of the topic, it is essential to construct a well-formulated research question that allows the student to develop an essay that is cogent, rational, and economical in expression. Ideas should be supported by relevant sources and specific reference to film and/or television texts.

For primary sources, there must be detailed references to at least one film (or major television work). Primary sources could consist of the film(s), the script, the screenplay, the score, personal contacts, or personal correspondence with individuals involved in making the film.

For secondary sources, there must be close references to relevant sources (print and other media) related to the essay’s title. Secondary sources could include journal and magazine articles, reviews, DVD “extras”, second unit material, promotional material, internet material.

Once the topic and research question have been selected, students should ask themselves the following questions.

- Is the topic one that will lead me to write a critical essay about film, film theory and history without offering temptations for irrelevant digressions into other areas?
- Is the research question well enough focused to allow for a thorough analysis within the word limit of the essay?
- Does the research question provide opportunities for me to write an essay that will meet the highest levels in the assessment criteria?

Making a schedule for writing the essay will help students both meet deadlines and avoid a last-minute rush to finish. Itemizing the stages of essay preparation (topic selection, research, drafting, polishing and finishing) in a timeline and leaving extra time for unforeseen problems is one way of ensuring the best work. Time for consultation with a supervisor or mentor needs to be built into the process.

Students should remember the cardinal rule of scheduling: Planning for just enough time will leave you short of time; plan for too much time, instead.

Essays must focus on developing, supporting and illustrating their argument, rather than on plot summary or character description. The essay should focus on the evaluation of the arguments in the sources rather than simply on repeating what the sources have to say. Essays should not rely too heavily on a single secondary source or on a number of items from a single author. A broad range of ideas from different sources should be explored.

The use of accurate terminology is an essential requirement of an extended essay in film. Students must pay close attention to the accurate and appropriate use of filmic terms. It is quite appropriate in an essay on film to include elements such as drawings, diagrams, storyboard frames or camera layouts to illustrate the text. All such references must be properly acknowledged, together with all other source materials, in a properly structured list of sources at the end of the essay.

Given all this, it is important to note that the most successful essays are often those with a clear voice that transmits the student’s enthusiasm and scholarship with clarity and conviction. The extended essay should reflect a coherent and informed engagement with the student’s chosen topic.

The following examples are intended as guidance only.

Title	Clint Eastwood as auteur
Research question	To what extent can Clint Eastwood be considered an auteur?
Approach	An investigation into the origins of auteur theory and a discussion of whether Clint Eastwood’s work qualifies him to be considered an auteur, with specific reference to <i>Play Misty For Me</i> (1971), <i>The Outlaw Josey Wales</i> (1976), <i>Bird</i> (1988) and <i>Million Dollar Baby</i> (2004).
Title	Neo-noir in colour
Research question	To what extent do the films <i>Chinatown</i> (1974), <i>Blood Simple</i> (1984) and <i>Pulp Fiction</i> (1994) qualify as film noirs?
Approach	An investigation into the origins and characteristics of the films classified as film noir, and an assessment as to how far the films listed above can be defined as belonging to the same genre or style.
Title	From Hill Street Blues to CSI

Research question	What has been the influence of <i>Hill Street Blues</i> on subsequent US television crime drama such as <i>NYPD Blue</i> and <i>CSI</i> ?
Approach	An investigation into the impact that <i>Hill Street Blues</i> has had upon the content and style of subsequent crime drama on American television, with particular reference to specific episodes of <i>NYPD Blue</i> and <i>CSI</i> , and the extent to which this has influenced the overall nature of the programmes.
Title	African film and cultural independence
Research question	To what extent have the films of Ousmane Sembene been able to retain a truly indigenous style and content in the face of pressures to make films more acceptable for an international market?
Approach	An investigation into how Ousmane Sembene's films have achieved and maintain international status in world cinema, with particular reference to the narrative and visual style of <i>Xala</i> (1974), <i>Guelwaar</i> (1992) and <i>Moolaade</i> (2004).
Title	Ang Lee as an international film-maker
Research question	To what extent do the films of Ang Lee enable him to be considered a truly international film-maker?
Approach	An investigation into what has enabled Ang Lee to become a significant contemporary director with films from very different cultural contexts, with particular reference to <i>Yin shi nan nu—Eat Drink Man Woman</i> (1994), <i>Sense and Sensibility</i> (1995), <i>Wo hu cang long—Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon</i> (2000) and <i>Brokeback Mountain</i> (2005).

Interpreting the assessment criteria

Criterion A: research question

The research question can often be best defined in the form of a question. It may, however, also be presented as a statement or proposition for discussion. It must be:

- specific and sharply focused
- appropriate to the particular area of film being explored
- centred on film, not on peripheral issues such as biography or social discourses
- stated clearly early on in the essay.

Criterion B: introduction

The introduction should relate the research question to existing subject knowledge: the student's personal experience or particular opinion is rarely relevant here.

The introduction should not be used to pad out an essay with a lengthy account of the context of the films chosen.

Criterion C: investigation

The range of resources available will be influenced by various factors, but above all by the topic. Students should use, in the first instance, the primary sources of the films and/or television programmes themselves, with secondary sources such as textbooks, reviews, websites and DVD "extras" as evidential support.

The proper planning of an essay should involve interrogating source material in light of the research question, so that the views of academics and theorists are used to support the student's own argument, and not as a substitute for that argument. It may thus be helpful for a student to challenge statements made in reference to the films being studied, instead of simply agreeing with them, where there is evidence to support such a challenge.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Students should demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the films and/or television programmes chosen, together with their historical, social and cultural, as well as academic, contexts. Wherever possible, this knowledge should be based at least partially on primary sources.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

Students should be aware of the need to give their essays the backbone of a developing argument. Personal views should not simply be stated but need to be supported by reasoned argument to persuade the reader of their validity. Straightforward descriptive or narrative accounts that lack analysis do not usually advance an argument and should be avoided.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject

Students should demonstrate an accurate and consistent application of appropriate textual analysis to illuminate specific aspects of the films and/or television programmes chosen, demonstrating an understanding and a persuasive personal interpretation of the subject matter. The key concept here is to address how moving-image texts in film and/or television create or construct meaning, and to evaluate how others have interpreted such meanings.

If students make use of internet-based sources, they should do so critically and circumspectly in full awareness of their potential unreliability.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject

Specifically filmic terminology must be used wherever appropriate.

Criterion H: conclusion

“Consistent” is the key word here: the conclusion should develop out of the argument and not introduce new or extraneous matter. It should not repeat the material of the introduction; rather, it should present a new synthesis in light of the discussion.

Criterion I: formal presentation

This criterion relates to the extent to which the essay conforms to academic standards about the way in which research papers should be presented. The presentation of essays that omit a bibliography or that do not give references for quotations is deemed unacceptable (level 0). Essays that omit one of the required elements—title page, table of contents, page numbers—are deemed no better than satisfactory (maximum level 2), while essays that omit two of them are deemed poor at best (maximum level 1). Filmographies should be included where appropriate; illustrations (including thumbnail screen grabs) and tables and charts, if relevant, should appear in the body of the essay, as close as possible to their first reference.

Criterion J: abstract

The abstract is judged on the clarity with which it presents an overview of the research and the essay, not on the quality of the research question itself, nor on the quality of the argument or the conclusions.

Criterion K: holistic judgment

Qualities that are rewarded under this criterion include the following.

- Intellectual initiative: Ways of demonstrating this in film essays include the choice of topic and research question, locating and using a wide range of sources, including some that may have been little used previously or generated for the study (for instance, transcripts of oral interviews).
- Insight and depth of understanding: These are most likely to be demonstrated as a consequence of detailed research, reflection that is thorough and well informed, and reasoned argument that consistently and effectively addresses the research question.
- Creativity: In film essays, this may include qualities such as comparison of filmic features, inventive approaches to textual analysis, and new approaches to popular topics.