

Psychology

Choice of topic

The topic may be an extension of an area covered on the Diploma Programme psychology course or a topic of interest outside the content covered.

When choosing their topic, students should remember that their EE must be based on secondary sources only. The collection of primary data is not permitted for the psychology EE (see [Treatment of the topic](#)).

The process of selecting a focused research question may be summarized as:

- choose a field in psychology of particular interest
- refine this choice to a specific topic
- develop a research question on this topic.

For example, a student might be interested in stress. They may then narrow this to the topic of stress within commercial aviation. Many large commercial airlines employ psychologists to investigate pilot performance and factors such as stress or emergency management. The student's research question could be: "To what extent does airline pilot stress affect airline safety standards?" (See also Examples of topics.)

Students must ensure that enough relevant and appropriate resources are available for them to conduct their research. They should investigate this at the start of their planning process.

The research question should require the construction of a systematically structured and fully supported argument in the development of an informed conclusion.

Supervisors do not necessarily require detailed knowledge of the student's topic.

Tricky topics



Topics within the fields of "pop psychology" or "self-help" will not be appropriate for the EE as they are not supported by peer-reviewed research studies.

Topics that do not lend themselves well to analysis, evaluation and debate are unlikely to be the best choices for a student.

Topics such as eating disorders, dysfunctional behaviours (eg schizophrenia or depression) and forensic psychology are popular with students. However, they pose a challenge unless students focus their research question very tightly. These topics are extremely ambitious, requiring far more time and experience than students generally have at their disposal.

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
The relationship between bilingualism and cognitive development	One- or two-language households
An examination of whether and how sleep contributes to learning	Sleep and learning
An examination of the extent to which music	Music and autism

therapy is effective in enhancing the communication skills of individuals diagnosed with autism	
The relationship between motivation techniques and performance in long-distance running	Motivation and achievement in sport

Treatment of the topic

Primary versus secondary data

Primary data collected using the students' own experiments, surveys, observations and case studies is inappropriate for the EE.

Instead, students must use secondary data from published sources. They should develop their argument with careful and appropriate citation of relevant concepts, theories and studies from academic psychological research journals and books.

Students should not make any assertions unsupported by evidence drawn from psychological theories or studies.

Analysis and discussion and evaluation

To develop a well-rounded understanding of their topic, students should carefully evaluate any research they cite. The essay should offer a balanced argument in response to the research question.

Students should demonstrate critical awareness and understanding of the material they use. They should analyse rather than simply describe. They need to apply what they have read to the research question rather than report the information.

One of the aims of all group 3 subjects is to enable the students to recognize that the content and methodologies of the subjects in group 3 are wide ranging and require students to critically evaluate the choices they make with regard to methodologies. An EE in psychology should demonstrate such understanding.

The [Psychology guide](#) introduces a framework for evaluation. It trains students to address cultural, ethical, gender and methodological considerations potentially affecting how a particular study or theory interprets behaviour.

Comparative analysis may also be a useful evaluative strategy.

Students should keep these considerations in mind when selecting a topic, generating a research question and developing their argument.

Ethical guidelines

The IB has published a set of [ethical guidelines](#) that apply to the psychology EE and internal assessment task.

Many topics within psychology are sensitive in nature. Students should consider carefully all possible ethical issues before they embark on their essay. Students and supervisors share the responsibility for ensuring it does not breach the guidelines.

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	Gender-related colour choices
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Research question	To what extent is preferred colour choice acquired or innate in young children?
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent fashions in the colours of children’s clothing, furnishings and toys seem to have reverted from gender-neutral schemes to pink for girls and blue for boys. This provides material for investigating the question of the extent to which such choices are the result of socialization or of innate predisposition. • A comparison of evaluated published research findings supporting each type of explanation, having linked the studies to relevant psychological theory. • Findings and related interpretations regarding the research question from different decades and/or cultural groups could be compared and evaluative commentary provided, focusing on addressing the “To what extent” aspect of the question, culminating in an informed summary conclusion.
Topic	Media influences on altruistic behaviours
Research question	To what extent do presentations in the media affect adult choices in volunteering to work for charities?
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An interest in social influences on pro-social behaviours in adults could result in curiosity about the factors affecting the varying levels of adult participation in volunteer activities. • Is there evidence or theory to suggest some individuals are more predisposed to pro-social behaviours than other individuals? • Use theory-based research into the efficacy of health campaigns to investigate the impact of media presentations on adult volunteer rates. • A balanced argument could evaluate evidence claiming support for the success of television adverts, personal presentations at meetings, newspaper articles, etc in recruiting adult volunteers for work with charities, comparing this with evidence to suggest personality type as a more dominant factor in pro-social behaviour. • The question covers a broad area including possible trans-historical and cross-cultural variations, so the essay’s introduction should clearly indicate the chosen parameters.

An important note on “double-dipping”

Students must ensure that their EE does not duplicate other work they are submitting for the Diploma Programme.

The EE and IA

In particular, an EE in psychology is not an extension of the internal assessment (IA) task.

Students must ensure that they understand the differences between the two. Students and supervisors share the responsibility for ensuring the EE differs in intent, content, methodology and outcome from the IA.

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