

Social and cultural anthropology: Subject-specific guidance

See also: EE generic guide and EE Teacher support material

Overview

An extended essay (EE) in social and cultural anthropology gives students an opportunity to learn what constitutes a distinctively anthropological approach to the organization of human life in society and culture.

Students will explore anthropological perspectives and ways of thinking, and develop critical, reflexive knowledge in an in-depth manner through their chosen topic of inquiry.

They are encouraged to pursue a research question that will develop their analytical skills and an understanding of principles of social and cultural life; and to experience the excitement of academic discovery.

The most successful essays reveal students who are well informed about their topic, with their understanding solidly grounded in anthropological concepts and theory.

Social and cultural anthropology may be defined as “the comparative study of culture and human societies”. The subject has its own theoretical and conceptual frames, terminology, methods and literature. It is therefore essential for students undertaking an EE in social and cultural anthropology to:

- be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of these
- choose a topic amenable to anthropological investigation.

Social and cultural anthropology is **not** a “residual” category for essays that do not fit into any other subject.

Students should not attempt to prepare an EE in social and cultural anthropology if they have not studied the subject formally.

Schools where it is not taught must be aware that students who submit EEs in the subject are risking being unable to meet the demands of the assessment criteria, and thus being awarded low marks.

Choice of topic

An EE in social and cultural anthropology allows students to investigate a topic of personal interest within the subject in a systematic manner.

It should be based on a focused research question that the student attempts to answer throughout the course of the essay. When choosing their topic, students should remember that their essay must be based on their reading of secondary sources. Primary data may only be used to supplement this (see Treatment of the topic).

Appropriate topics

Many topics are potentially suitable for an essay in social and cultural anthropology. Students should use the social and cultural anthropology guide to ensure that their topic is appropriately anthropological.

An appropriate topic is one that:

- invites a critical examination of the issue in light of relevant anthropological theories and concepts, framing the argument within anthropological perspectives
- lends itself to a focused research question.

Topics that are too general almost inevitably lead to a discussion that is inappropriately descriptive and superficial. In contrast, more tightly focused essay topics encourage clear expositions of the research problem and its theoretical implications.

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 political uses of the concept of culture: the case of the Islamic veil	Islam and the media
An investigation of food consumption as a symbolic marker of class identity in Cairo's Zamalek area	Food and social identity
Albanian sworn virgins: gender performance and subversion of patriarchy	Gender inequality
The authenticity of Japanese hip hop: global culture in a local context	Music and globalization

Personal interest

Personal commitment to the chosen topic is encouraged and often leads to successful essays.

However, students must be aware that an emotional or experiential commitment to a particular issue can weaken their analysis. Any personal commitment must be reinforced with appropriate anthropological theory and concepts, including explicit reference to what anthropologists have to say about an issue.

For instance, anthropologists have written a great deal about the role of women in Islam. To achieve high marks, an essay that addresses the issue from a theological interpretation of sacred texts, or from journalistic accounts, must frame the discussion within the context of anthropological research on religion and/or gender in specific societies.

Inappropriate topics

Students must bear in mind that their topic must encourage analysis and evaluation rather than description and unsupported value judgments.

Inappropriate topics are ones that:

- seek to find solutions to social problems in an abstract fashion
- consist of polemical arguments for a particular position
- present value judgments.

For example, the research question “Abortion: can one make a decision concerning the life of another human being?” cannot be analysed from the perspective of social and cultural anthropology.

Other subfields of anthropology

Topics from subfields of anthropology other than social and cultural anthropology, such as archeology, primatology or the study of human evolution, are inappropriate.

EEs in linguistic anthropology are acceptable, provided that they demonstrate the student’s ability to analyse language in its socio-cultural context. Students interested in conducting a research project in linguistic anthropology should be warned that they may require background in linguistics as well as social and cultural anthropology.

Treatment of the topic

Research question

Students should craft a specific research question that is both interesting to them and challenging. It should be sufficiently narrow to allow examination of an issue in depth within the word limit. A limited topic thoroughly researched and with a clear focus is preferable to a broad topic that can only be examined superficially.

Sources

To address their research question students should provide a critical examination of the topic under study. They should gather and interpret material from sources relevant to the research question.

Primary versus secondary sources

The sole use of secondary sources is permitted and will allow students access to all levels of the EE assessment criteria. These sources include published ethnographic research and other relevant anthropological literature. Many successful essays are based solely on published data.

Primary data produced by students may be used as a supplementary research strategy, but **must not** be the focus of the essay. In particular, students are not permitted to use the data collected for their internal assessment task in an EE.

Analysis and evaluation

Students should apply analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject, with an understanding of the implications and the context of their research. They should also acknowledge their sources and use subject-specific terminology.

Students' references to relevant anthropological concepts, theories and ethnographic studies must be integrated throughout the essay. These form the basis for the development of an argument in response to the research question.

The essay should go beyond description and include the student's own original analysis and identification of underlying patterns and causes. It must not merely summarize others' research findings. Research and claims should be carefully evaluated, and students' assertions should always be supported by evidence that is drawn from anthropological studies.

All the ethnographic data selected should be analysed in their social, cultural, political and historical contexts and explicit reference made to ethical issues involved. This applies to both published ethnographic materials and the student's own fieldwork, where undertaken.

Comparative projects

Research strategies involving two or more societies may call for greater narrowing of the research focus than a study in a single society.

For example, a comparative analysis of Mexican and US views of death is too broad. The topic could be narrowed down by focusing on specific subgroups of each society and a few well-chosen contrasting points. From these, the student would identify underlying patterns and causes.

Successful essays:

- show initiative in demonstrating how to approach anthropologically a topic of interest
- consistently place their research questions within an anthropological frame of reference
- produce balanced, nuanced arguments
- develop a critical approach to their own research and the work they cite.

Students should keep these considerations in mind when selecting a topic, defining a research question and developing an argument. Frequent reference to the assessment criteria by both the supervisor and the student will help keep a sharper focus on the project.

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	The concept of resistance within anthropological theory—its interpretation and application in different contemporary ethnographies
Research question	What constitutes the theoretical novelty and value of the concept of resistance and how is it applied in recent contemporary ethnographies?
Approach	An analysis and evaluation of the concept of resistance in relation to the debate on agency and structure, through the readings of ethnographies and subject literature on the topic. The study contextualizes the history of the concept within specific schools of thought, and discusses its application in some selected ethnographies to assess its theoretical value.

Topic	A comparative study of two theoretical orientations of medical anthropology through an evaluation of the social and cultural factors related to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa
Research question	Interpretive versus critical medical anthropology: which approach is the most useful in finding solutions to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa?
Approach	Based on secondary sources—mainly review of ethnographic and other anthropological works—a comparative analysis and evaluation of two theoretical orientations of medical anthropology and the different interventions motivated by each perspective. Social and cultural factors such as kinship structures and sorcery beliefs are analysed as chosen comparative points in relation to the two approaches.

Topic	Gender and the body: Plastic surgery and social representations of the female body among urban, middle-class women of Montevideo, Uruguay
Research question	What are the social representations of the feminine body that middle-class Uruguayan women hold, and to what extent are these influential in the practices of cosmetic plastic surgery?
Approach	Focusing on the concept of “legitimate” bodies, drawing from post-modern and symbolic approaches, this investigation uses both primary and secondary sources to address the phenomenon of the growing demand of esthetic surgeries among middle-class, urban women in Uruguay.

Topic	Commodification and the body: An ethnographic study of social representations about the human body with relation to organ donation
Research question	To what extent can we interpret the negative attitude from laymen towards organ donation as an act of resistance towards the demands of the hegemonic medical model? The case of organ donation in Argentina.
Approach	The study approaches the topic from symbolic theories, and the concepts of hegemony and resistance. The student’s own field data from interviews and questionnaires supplements the investigation. The low rate of voluntary organ donations in Argentina is discussed in its relation to the conflict of meanings between the instrumental definition of body implicit in biomedicine and the lay symbolic representations of this concept.

Topic	Social constraints and individual behaviour: The connection between emotions and the structure of society
Research question	In what ways are emotions among the Utkuhikalingmiut of the Canadian arctic connected to the structure of the society and how are they culturally regulated?
Approach	Using secondary sources—mainly two ethnographic works and other anthropological works on the topic—a discussion is put forward exploring social and cultural expression and regulation of emotions from a structural perspective.

An important note on “double-dipping”

Students must ensure that their EE does not overlap significantly with any other work they are submitting for the Diploma Programme.

The EE and IA

In particular, the EE is not an extension of the internal assessment (IA) task. Students must ensure that they understand the differences between the two.

- Whereas the IA is based on primary sources, including fieldwork, the EE can only use primary sources as a supplement to secondary data and sources; the EE must be based on existing ethnographic material(s).
- The EE must construct a theoretical or conceptual framework for exploring an anthropological topic.
- The EE assesses explicitly a students’ conceptual and/or theoretical understanding of the topic being researched and their ability to analyse and evaluate anthropological arguments.
- The IA is a report on fieldwork data collected, whereas the EE is an academic research paper.

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

Interpreting the EE assessment criteria

Criterion A: Focus and method

(Strands: Topic, Research question, Methodology)

The topic must be:

- suitable to be framed within the discipline’s theory or concepts, researched and analysed in anthropological terms
- expressed in the form of a research question
- evident from the start of the essay.

The research question must be:

- focused
- capable of being discussed effectively within the word limit
- written in the form of a question
- identified clearly and set out prominently at the start of the essay.

The anthropological context of the research question should be clearly demonstrated, ie how it relates to existing subject knowledge on the topic and how the topic chosen is significant and worthy of investigation.

Students’ selection of sources and data-collecting techniques, where applicable, depend on the goals of the research.

The student also needs to establish the essay's theoretical or conceptual frame, its purpose and focus early in the essay. They must demonstrate, too, that the research has been well planned.

Students should explore the research question within the theoretical and conceptual frames set out. Their main source of research should be secondary sources—published ethnographies and other subject literature.

Students may use their own fieldwork data as a primary source to complement and support their research strategy, but it should not be the focus of the essay. In all cases, the essay must make explicit reference to anthropological concepts and theory, drawing from ethnographic and anthropological readings.

Students must demonstrate that their chosen methods and materials are appropriate for addressing the research question. Students must also demonstrate that they have selected a suitable range of appropriate and relevant sources. These must provide sufficient material to develop and support both an argument and a conclusion relevant to the research question.

The rationale for choosing primary sources as part of the methodology should be clearly explained. Where students have undertaken their own field research they must clearly demonstrate their understanding of the methods applied and the reasons for their choices.

Criterion B: Knowledge and understanding

(Strands: Context, Subject-specific terminology and concepts)

Students should integrate into the discussion clear and explicit evidence of specific and relevant anthropological readings that allow the chosen topic to be examined in depth. They should also demonstrate a sound knowledge of anthropological concepts and theory relevant to the research question and locate the investigation in an academic context.

Whatever the focus of the investigation, the student must analyse all selected sources in their social, cultural, political and historical contexts. They must show they understand the theoretical and methodological problems involved in the collection, evaluation and presentation of ethnographic data.

All sources should be effectively referenced and incorporated into the main body of the essay in a way that demonstrates the students' understanding. Literature cited should predominantly come from acknowledged anthropological sources.

Students should be familiar with terminology specific to the discipline and be able to use it effectively. The awareness that some terms are contested or may change their meaning over time should be incorporated into the essay where relevant.

Criterion C: Critical thinking

(Strands: Research, Analysis and Discussion and evaluation)

The research undertaken must be relevant and appropriate to the research question. Students must demonstrate the ability to apply sources and methods effectively in support of their argument.

The material should always be examined from an anthropological perspective, using the theoretical underpinnings, analytical tools and methods of the discipline.

All selected primary and secondary sources should be analysed in their social, cultural, political and historical contexts.

Students must be aware of the ethical dimensions involved in the research process.

Students should be aware of the need to give their essays a solid foundation for developing an argument. The essay should move beyond mere description, and offer anthropologically sound generalizations and explanations.

The essay should include a clear discussion of underlying patterns and causes of an anthropological nature, and their relation to the topic in question. Straightforward descriptive or narrative accounts should be avoided.

The presentation of unsupported value judgments or conclusions of a prescriptive nature is inappropriate.

The conclusion should develop out of the argument and not introduce new evidence or extraneous matter. It should not repeat the introduction; rather it should present a new synthesis in light of the discussion.

Students should be encouraged to consistently adopt a critical, reflexive approach to the research so that they can identify its strengths, shortcomings and ethical dimensions.

Criterion D: Presentation

(Strands: Structure, Layout)

This criterion relates to the extent to which the essay conforms to accepted academic standards in relation to how research papers should be presented. It also relates to how well these elements support the reading, understanding and evaluation of the essay.

Students may provide a section and subsection structure to their essays, with informative headings. Subheadings should not distract from the overall structure of the essay or argument presented.

Use of charts, images and tables

Any charts, images or tables from literature sources included in the essay must be carefully selected and labelled. They should only be used if they are directly relevant to the research question, contribute towards the understanding of the argument and are of a good graphic quality.

Tables of processed data should be designed to clearly display the information in the most appropriate form. Graphs or charts drawn from the analysed data should be selected to highlight only the most pertinent aspects related to the argument. Too many graphs, charts and tables will distract from the overall quality of the communication.

Only processed data that is central to the argument of the essay should be included in the body of the essay, as close as possible to its first reference. Tables should enhance a written explanation but not themselves include significant bodies of text. If they do, then these words must be included in the word count.

Any material that is not original must be carefully acknowledged, with specific attention paid to the acknowledgment and referencing of quotes and ideas. This acknowledgment and referencing is applicable to audiovisual material, text, graphs and data published in print and electronic sources. If the referencing does not meet the minimum standard as indicated in the guide (name of author, date of publication, title of source and page numbers as applicable), and is not consistently applied, work will be considered as a case of possible academic misconduct.

A bibliography is essential and has to be presented in a standard format. Title page, table of contents, page numbers, etc must contribute to the quality of presentation.

The essay must not exceed 4,000 words of narrative. Students should be aware that examiners will not read beyond the 4,000-word limit, nor assess any material presented thereafter.

Criterion E: Engagement

(Strands: Reflections on planning and progress)

This criterion assesses the student's engagement with their research focus and the research process. It will be applied by the examiner at the end of the assessment of the essay, and is based solely on the candidate's reflections as detailed on the [RPPF](#), with the supervisory comments and extended essay itself as context.

Students are expected to provide reflections on the decision-making and planning process undertaken in completing the essay. Students must demonstrate how they arrived at a topic as well as the methods and approach used. This criterion assesses the extent to which a student has evidenced the rationale for decisions made throughout the planning process and the skills and understandings developed.

For example, students may reflect on:

- the approach and strategies they chose, and their relative success
- the [Approaches to learning](#) skills they have developed and their effect on the student as a learner
- how their conceptual understandings have developed or changed as a result of their research
- challenges they faced in their research and how they overcame these
- questions that emerged as a result of their research
- what they would do differently if they were to undertake the research again.

Effective reflection highlights the journey the student has engaged in through the EE process. Students must show evidence of critical and reflective thinking that goes beyond simply describing the procedures that have been followed.

The reflections must provide the examiner with an insight into **student** thinking, creativity and originality within the research process. The **student** voice must be clearly present and demonstrate the learning that has taken place.