

OXFORD IB DIPLOMA PROGRAMME



EXTENDED ESSAY

COURSE COMPANION

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OXFORD

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2: Getting started

All Extended Essays require you to formulate your own research question that will invite an investigation and can be meaningfully answered within the prescribed limit of 4,000 words.

Subject and topic

As a starting point **always** opt for topics that are of meaningful interest to you. Consider the following questions:

1. Which subjects have you really enjoyed?		
Subject A:	Subject B:	Subject C:
For example: English literature	History	Biology
2. Which <i>topic areas</i> or <i>themes</i> or <i>periods</i> have you been intrigued by within these subject areas?		
Topic(s), Theme(s) or Period(s)		
For example: ● 19th-century novels ● Love ● Relationships	● Ancient Greece ● Spartans ● Greco-Persian wars	● Micro-organisms ● Bacteria

Designing a research question

Once you've considered the above table you will have a starting point for the development of your research question.

For example, your first column may indicate that you are interested in writing an Extended Essay on the following:

The theme of love and relationships in 19th-century novels

This, however, is quite a broad topic and so will need to be narrowed down in order to produce a **workable research question**.

A useful technique is to start applying "limiting factors" to the broad topic you've initially selected. Taking the example above, a limiting factor would emerge from asking, "Which novelist from the 19th century am I interested in?"

The answer to this will limit the scope of the investigation to a specific author(s) thus limiting the range from an initial and very broad topic (that is, 19th-century novels) to specific novelists from the 19th century.

The original title above could now be refined to this:

The theme of love and relationships in the novels of Jane Austen

However, this is still too broad a basis for a research question as there are simply too many Austen novels to be able to successfully answer this

Terminology



Workable research question:

A question with a clear focus that can be successfully answered within the given word limit.

within the word limit. Further questions would therefore need to be asked to help limit the scope of the investigation further.

As you will see in the table below, we can narrow down the scope of the investigation by taking each aspect of the question in turn and asking what the possible limiting factors could be (highlighted in yellow).

Terminology



Limiting factors: Relevant sub-areas for investigation that help limit the scope of one's research question.

Subject:	ENGLISH (Language A)
ORIGINAL TITLE: The theme of love and relationships in 19th-century novels	
Limiting factor:	19th-century novels
Question:	Which novels or novelists from the 19 th century am I interested in?
Answer:	Jane Austen



REFINED TITLE: The theme of love and relationships in the novels of Jane Austen	
Limiting factor:	Jane Austen
Question:	Which specific work(s) by Austen?
Answer:	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>



REFINED TITLE: The theme of love and relationships in <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	
Limiting factor:	Relationships
Question:	What type of relationships?
Answer:	Married/Unmarried



REFINED TITLE: Austen's attitudes to love and marriage in <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	
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FINAL QUESTION

In what ways does Jane Austen express her attitudes to the themes of love and marriage inherent in her work *Pride and Prejudice*?

The above refined title is a very good starting point to begin your Extended Essay research as it has a clear focus and is narrow enough to be covered within the word limit.



Below are further examples of how one can apply limiting factors to a variety of subject-specific titles:

Subject:	History
ORIGINAL TITLE: Authoritarian states of the 20 th century	
Limiting factor:	Authoritarian states
Question:	Which authoritarian states am I interested in?
Answer:	Communism under Stalin, Fascism under Mussolini



REFINED TITLE: A comparison of the communist state in Russia under Stalin with the fascist state of Italy under Benito Mussolini.	
Limiting Factor:	Comparison, communist state, fascist state
Question:	Which specific area of these two states am I interested in comparing?
Answer:	Who was more effective in controlling their citizens



REFINED TITLE: To what extent was Stalin's communist state more effective than Mussolini's fascist state in controlling its citizens?	
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Subject:	Visual arts
ORIGINAL TITLE: The architecture of Le Corbusier	
Limiting factor:	Architecture
Question:	What specific architecture from Le Corbusier's work am I interested in?
Answer:	Villa Stein (Garches, France), Unité d'Habitation (Marseilles, France)



REFINED TITLE: An exploration into the works Villa Stein and Unité d'Habitation by architect Le Corbusier.	
Limiting Factor:	Villa Stein (Garches, France), Unité d'Habitation (Marseilles, France)
Question:	Which specific aspect of these buildings do I want to explore?
Answer:	The use of proportional systems such as Le Corbusier's "Modulor"



REFINED TITLE: In what ways does Le Corbusier utilize the Modulor proportional system in the works Villa Stein and Unité d'Habitation?	
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Subject:	Psychology
ORIGINAL TITLE: The usefulness of music therapy	
Limiting factor:	Usefulness
Question:	Useful in what manner or in what field?
Answer:	As a palliative for dementia sufferers



REFINED TITLE: An evaluation of the success of music therapy as a palliative for sufferers of dementia.	
Limiting factor:	Dementia
Question:	Which specific type of dementia do you wish to explore?
Answer:	Dementia of the Alzheimer's Type (DAT)



REFINED TITLE: To what extent can music therapy be deemed a successful palliative for the symptoms of Dementia of the Alzheimer's Type (DAT)?	
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Limiting factors

Below is a list of general terms that allow for the narrowing down (or “limiting”) of potential research questions. They are all accompanied by examples showing how a question can be more sharply focused when the general terms (in red) are narrowed down by asking “limiting” questions (highlighted in green).

Accuracy

Accurate in determining what exactly?	
Original question	How accurate are baseline tests such as Advanced Level Information System (ALIS) or Middle Years Information System (MYIS) in education?
Revised question	To what extent can baseline tests such as ALIS be seen as an accurate means of determining student performance at IB?

Aspect

Is there a specific aspect that could be investigated (for example, a particular military confrontation, a specific programme, a type of therapy or a specific law)?	
Original question	How effective was Nazi propaganda in controlling its people?
Revised question	How effective was Nazi Youth propaganda in terms of indoctrinating German citizens aged 14–18?



Author

Which specific author/artist/scientist did you have in mind?	
Original question	How influential was religious iconography in the development of abstract art ?
Revised question	To what extent does the religious iconography of the Orthodox Church shape the Composition series by Wassily Kandinsky ?

Case study

Which case study did you wish to explore?	
Original question	Can studies on language conclusively show the impact of language on memory recall?
Revised question	How conclusive is the Loftus and Palmer study when it comes to determining the effect of language on memory recall?

Cause

Is there a specific cause of what you are trying to ascertain or measure (for example, an event, a person or group, or a chemical)?	
Original question	The re-election of Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative Party in 1983
Revised question	To what extent did the Falklands War help Margaret Thatcher secure the 1983 elections for the Conservative Party?

Effect

Is there a specific effect you are trying to ascertain or measure (for example, on behaviour or in terms of migration patterns or development of laws)?	
Original question	What accounts for decreased levels of intelligence among the young?
Revised question	To what extent can high levels of fluoride be seen as a major cause of decreased intelligence levels among children aged 5–10?

Effectiveness

What exactly are you referring to by “effective”? Effective in what way?	
Original question	The effectiveness of mental toughness among American Football players
Revised question	To what extent can mental toughness improve the athletic performance of American Football players?

Experiment

Which experiment do you wish to explore or question the validity of?	
Original question	Can an experiment in psychology ever be objective?
Revised question	To what extent can Benjamin Libet's experiments on free will be deemed objective?

Factors

Which specific factor do you want to focus on (for example, military, economic, social, cultural, religious, upbringing or nurturing)?	
Original question	The Greek victory over the Persians from 480 to 479 BC
Revised question	To what extent was the Battle of Thermopylae the most significant factor in the Greek victory over the Persians?

Features

Which specific feature do you wish to explore in your essay (for example, compositional, database or connectivity)?

Original question In-flight services provided by a major airline

Revised question To what extent does the introduction of the Tempus system on X airline improve in-flight health care?

Location

Which country, city or location do you want to investigate?

Original question Implementation of Ravenstein's migration laws

Revised question To what extent can Ravenstein's migration laws be applied to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates?

Material

Is there a specific material that lends itself well to your investigation (for example, a specific chemical, a metallic substance or a piece of technology)?

Original question The rate of enamel decay as a result of drinking orange juice as compared to whitening toothpastes

Revised question The concentration of citric acid found in orange juice is more effective at stripping tooth enamel than the peroxide found in whitening toothpaste?

Methodology

Is there a specific method you want to investigate in terms of your approach?

Original question Which method works best for determining cash-flow optimization in the banking sector?

Revised question How effective is the Taguchi method in determining optimal cash-flow levels in the banking sector?

Process

Is there a specific process or model that you could refer to? (for example, a specific model, research model or interpretation model)

Original question Company X's business model in improving sales between 2000 and 2005.

Revised question To what extent did the change from a business-to-business model to a business-to-consumer model help improve sales for company X from 2000 to 2005?

Reliability

Reliable in determining what or when compared to what exactly?

Original question The reliability of meteorological (weather) forecast models

Revised question To what extent can the use of Model Output Statistics produce reliable results when it comes to making hurricane predictions?

School

Is there a specific school of thought or movement you had in mind on which to base your interpretation or reading?

Original question A closer reading of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.

Revised question In what ways can William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* be seen as representative of the Cubist Movement?



Skills

Which specific skill(s) did you wish to explore? (for example, numeracy, literacy or computational)	
Original question	Use of interactive software in classroom learning
Revised question	In what ways does the use of e-learning platforms such as X improve the literacy skills of students aged 5–10?

Society

Is there a specific type of social structure you'd like to explore? (such as patriarchal, matriarchal or industrial)	
Original question	Conflict between traditional and contemporary wedding practices in India
Revised question	To what extent can contemporary wedding practices in India be deemed a break from the patriarchal principles enshrined in the Manuvad system ?

Technique

Is there a specific technique you want to investigate in terms of your approach?	
Original question	The theme of sexuality as seen in Syd Brak's "Kiss" series of work?
Revised question	To what extent does the use of airbrush techniques enhance the theme of sexuality in Syd Brak's "Kiss" n series?

Texts

Which specific text did you have in mind to focus your investigation on?	
Original question	Representations of autism in contemporary literature
Revised question	In what ways does Mark Haddon use the first-person perspective to represent autism in his novel <i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time</i> ?

Time period

Which specific period in time did you want to investigate (for example, early years, defined period such as a decade or a specific event in time)?	
Original question	Impact of the White Australia Policy on Australia's economy
Revised question	To what extent was the implementation of the White Australia Policy in 1901 detrimental to Federated Australia's economical development from 1901 to 1920 ?

Type

Is there a specific product, version or design you have in mind?	
Original question	The ergonomic design of modern-day console controllers
Revised question	How have ergonomic factors been considered in the design of the PlayStation 4 controller to maximize first-person shooter (FPS) gameplay efficiency?

Comparisons

Occasionally, in the process of researching and reading for your selected title, you may discover that it easily accommodates a comparative that will lend the essay a more robust investigative focus. There is absolutely nothing wrong with expanding the reach of your essay to include a comparison, provided that a meaningful comparison can be made within the word limit.

Tip



If your essay's original research question is proving to be too narrow, consider adding a comparative element.

For example, in the English (Language A) question used above, the comparative element could alter the title to the following:

How do Jane Austen and Helen Fielding express differing attitudes towards the themes of love and marriage inherent in their respective works *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*?

Another option would have been to compare two novels by Austen, provided they showed some difference in terms of how she approached the theme of love and marriage (for example, a work from her earlier years compared to one written much later in her life, when her attitudes may have changed with time).

Below are examples of the comparative element added to a research question in biology and history:

Biology – Non-comparative	To what extent do natural products reduce the growth of normal microflora (<i>Candida albicans</i> and <i>Streptococcus mutans</i>) in the oral cavity?
Biology – Comparative	To what extent do natural products reduce the growth of normal microflora (<i>Candida albicans</i> and <i>Streptococcus mutans</i>) in the oral cavity and differ in effect to commercial mouthwashes?
History – Non-comparative	To what extent could Anna Komnene's account of the First Crusade in her history the <i>Alexiad</i> be considered reliable?
History – Comparative	To what extent could Anna Komnene's the <i>Alexiad</i> and William of Tyre's <i>Historia</i> be considered reliable accounts of the First Crusade?

Question vs. title

Prior to the introduction of the new Extended Essay criteria in 2016, it was possible to state your research question in the form of a proposition, hypothesis or statement that invites an exploration. This would mean that your research question would be written up as a **title**.

This is **no longer** the case when it comes to Extended Essays. The new rules are quite clear on this matter and as such **all** Extended Essays must contain a research question written up as a question as opposed to a title.

However, this does not mean that when it comes to designing your research question you cannot begin with a title or hypothesis, provided that the finished version is in the form of a question.

Below is an example of how a working title in an English (Language A) Extended Essay could be converted into a question:

Title format:	The subversion of the archetypal depictions and classifications of the "hero" in George RR Martin's novel <i>A Game of Thrones</i> .
Question format:	How does George RR Martin subvert the archetypal depictions and classifications of the "hero" in his novel <i>A Game of Thrones</i> ?

Special note



It is still possible to include a title as part of a cover page in addition to the research question. It is also perfectly fine to include hypotheses or titles for the purposes of section or chapter headings within the body of the essay itself. This often helps planning how to break your research question into smaller, more manageable parts.



Question starters

Below is a list of common question starters that may help you design your own research question or convert a working title into a question format.

Question starter	Description
To what extent ...	Allows for an evaluation of the degree (extent) to which something is true or a contributing factor. To effectively answer this type of question, the main body of the essay should include considerations of other influencing factors. For example, a question relating to the extent to which the Spanish Constitution of 1931 caused the civil war of 1936 could potentially examine the role played by the military, external nations and other factors in order to more fully answer “the extent” aspect of the question.
Assess the role of ...	Allows for an analysis of a specific factor or the contribution of something/someone.
How accurate/reliable ...	Allows for an exploration relating to accuracy or usefulness.
How far could one argue ...	Allows for the analysis to focus on the accuracy/truthfulness of a specific argument or line of enquiry.
How successful ...	Allows for an evaluation of the success of an approach, method, policy, style and so on an associated area (for example, success of a political policy on economic development of X region).
How crucial/significant ...	Allows for an analysis of the significance of one or more factors on other associated areas.
Which factors played ...	Allows for an investigation around key factors.
Has the introduction (or cancellation) of ... resulted in ...	Allows for a cause/effect-style investigation.
Does [X] process/approach provide ...	Allows for a focused investigation on the result of a specific method followed or technique used.
What is the contribution/influence of ...	Allows for a focused investigation on the impact (positive or negative) of a certain individual, group, material or concept on a broader area (for example, on a specific society).
What evidence is there to support ...	Allows for an investigation into the nature of evidence and the extent to which it can support a thesis or approach.
What is the impact of ...	A straightforward causal investigation.
Is it possible to determine ...	An investigation into hypothetical frameworks based on existing and available evidence.
Under what circumstances may ...	Allows an investigation into the conditions required before X is deemed possible (for example, for a business to expand).
Is there a correlation between ...	Allows for an investigation into the relationship between two or more factors.

Feasibility

Having a good research question is very important; however, equally as important is ensuring that this question is feasible. In order to evaluate the feasibility of a question it should meet a series of requirements including materials, equipment access and ethical guidelines, all of which will be outlined below. The key concern here is that the best questions do not always make the best Extended Essays if they cannot be researched effectively.

Remember



The best questions do not always make the best Extended Essays if they cannot be researched effectively.

Locating sources

Once you have arrived at a workable research question (or title) the next step is to see if you can **find and access** enough source material to begin your research investigation proper. This often takes the form of locating either primary or secondary sources (or a combination of both, in some instances) which will form the initial, core body of your work. This material will be the base of your analysis while simultaneously acting as an indication of whether such an investigation is feasible in the first place.

As a rule of thumb it is useful to identify at least **5–10 sources** that relate to your research question (or title) in order to ensure that the question is feasible. This is not a hard-and-fast rule, but it is useful in a number of ways:

- proving to yourself (and your potential supervisor) the feasibility of your question
- providing a starting basis for your investigation
- situating your work in a wider body of research.

Having said this, not every Extended Essay subject requires the use of primary or secondary sources. Refer to Chapter 3 for more support with locating suitable source material for an Extended Essay, along with a list of subjects and the degree to which each requires either primary or secondary (or both) source material.

Tip



Try to locate at least 5–10 sources relating to your research question to prove its feasibility.

Note



A useful feasibility checklist is available on page 23.

Ethical guidelines for Extended Essays research and fieldwork

- Extended Essay students must exercise the greatest sensitivity to local and international cultures.
- Any research/fieldwork that creates anxiety, stress, pain or discomfort for participants is not permitted.
- Any research/fieldwork that involves unjustified deception, involuntary participation or invasion of privacy, including inappropriate use of information technology (IT), email and the internet, is prohibited.
- All participants in research activities must be informed before commencing the research that they have the right to withdraw at any time. Pressure must not be placed on any individual participant to continue with the investigation beyond this point.
- Each participant must be informed of the aims and objectives of the research and in addition be shown the results of the research.
- Informed consent should be obtained from the people who are the subject of the fieldwork. Research involving children needs the written consent of parent(s) or guardian(s). Students must ensure that parents are fully informed about the implications for children who take part in such research. Where research is conducted with children in a school, the written consent of the teachers concerned must also be obtained.
- Extended Essay students must avoid conducting research with any adult who is not in a fit state of mind and cannot respond freely and independently.
- If any participant shows stress and/or pain at any stage of the research, the research must finish immediately, and the participant must be allowed to withdraw.

- Participants must be debriefed and given the right to withdraw their own personal data and responses. Anonymity for each participant must be guaranteed.
- All data collected must be kept in a confidential and responsible manner and not divulged to any other person.
- Research that is conducted online, using IT methods, is subject to the same guidelines. Any data collected online must be deleted once the research has been completed. Such data must not be used for any purpose other than the conduct of the research.

– *IB Ethical Guidelines, International Baccalaureate Organization, 2011*

Disproving a research question

Many students often worry that their questions must be framed in a manner that can be positively proven, that is to say, the key thesis contained in their question must be correct.

For example, if I want to write a History Extended Essay on the American War of Independence, I may opt for a question such as:

To what extent was George Washington's leadership a key factor in the American victory during the American War of Independence (1775–83)?

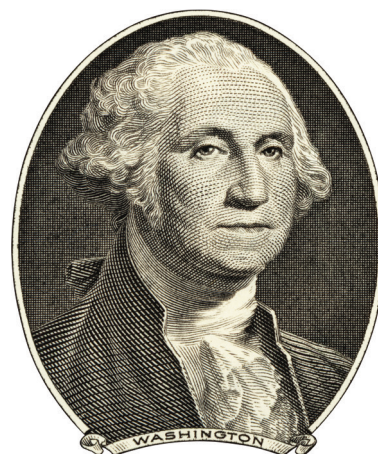
Even though there were certainly other factors, the conclusion to this question will more or less agree with the main thesis contained within it (that is, that Washington was indeed a key factor behind the American victory). Naturally, there is nothing wrong with a question like this, but you should not be afraid to explore alternative theses that your essay could disprove.

For example, taking the same historical episode, an alternate question could be:

To what extent was the French and Spanish entry into the American War of Independence from 1778 to 1779 the key factor behind the final American victory in 1783?

Here we are presented with an apparent negative in that the French and Spanish contributions were not the key factors per se and thus we may reject using such a question because our conclusion will end up disproving the question's key thesis.

However, there is nothing wrong with doing exactly that in your Extended Essay as it shows the hallmarks of good research. If you pursued an essay such as this, you could mention the Franco-Spanish contributions followed by all the other factors that played a part in the American victory (for example, Washington's leadership, the geography, British mistakes, economic factors and military manoeuvres) before concluding that the War of Independence was won due to a variety of factors. In your conclusion you can assess the degree to which the Franco-Spanish contributions could be deemed "key" when compared against the other factors raised in the body of your essay. Provided this evaluation was present, this type of question opens up many opportunities for focused analysis and reasoned assessment.



Remember that one of the central pillars of the IB's Extended Essay is for students to wrestle with all the associated aspects of independent research and this often entails proposing theses that end up being disproven. Academic circles often seek to disprove, as well as prove, hypothesis in order to push knowledge a little further on. The key is to provide proof either affirming or disproving your thesis and not to worry if you end up disagreeing with your question's main thesis.

Changing your research question

1. **Change of subject and topic:** You may find yourself changing your research question quite a bit as your interests shift or as you encounter obstacles—usually in the shape of a lack of resources. As a result, you may find yourself wishing to change topics and/or subjects completely. This is perfectly normal state of affairs, however, **you should set yourself a cut-off point** after which no more changes are permissible. This will ensure that the work needed to be done for the Extended Essay can be completed without it affecting other assessments that will inevitably be due as part of the IB programme you are studying.

Tip



It is recommended that you avoid changing your subject and topic after the first six months of your first year of IB studies as you will find yourself well behind in terms of preparation.

Each school will inevitably have different logistical considerations to wrestle with (such as supervisor availability and assessment calendars) so cut-off points may already be set by the school. It is always important to stick with these as your school has its own process through which it engages the Extended Essay. The general consensus is that if a student does not have a fixed research question within the first six months of their IB studies, then this will add significant pressure on them to complete the Extended Essay once you factor in all their other Diploma or Course obligations. This does not mean, however, that tweaking and adjustments to a question are not possible throughout the process of writing your Extended Essay (more on this below).

2. **Adjustments to the research question:** It is quite common, and even advisable, to constantly re-evaluate your research question in light of the reading and research you conduct on your topic. The reading and research phase will inevitably open up new pathways that you may not have considered previously, or it may shed new light on a different approach that can be followed.

The key thing to remember is that your research question should:

- a. reflect what your essay actually is about
- b. be the question your conclusion responds to.

Essays often lose marks because the question on the cover is not exactly what the student has ended up writing about in the body of the essay or, most commonly, what the student has responded to in their conclusion. The best way to avoid this mismatch from occurring is to adjust your

Top tip



Adding a note in your Researcher's Reflection Space and then again reflecting on this change in your RPPF is also highly recommended as it will demonstrate the perfectly natural process of refining and re-evaluating that occurs with all research-oriented investigations.



research question to match what you **actually** wrote about in the end. Re-read your essay and if you feel the analysis has shifted to a different focus (however slight) then go back and reverse engineer your research question to match it.

Case study



John's initial research question was:

Which factor best explains Pharaoh Hatshepsut's rise to power in 1478 BC?

However, as he began researching and reading on the female Pharaoh he discovered that there was a lot more to be said for her consolidation of power as opposed to her rise to power.

The question was thus adapted midway through his research to read:

Which factor best explains Pharaoh Hatshepsut's consolidation of power from 1478 to 1458 BC?

Once the essay was near completion, John noted that his essay leaned heavily on Hatshepsut's use of religious and diplomatic propaganda to gain control over Egypt and that this was in fact the underlying thread throughout the essay. The question was thus adapted again to read:

To what extent can Hatshepsut's use of religious and diplomatic propaganda be considered the key factor behind her consolidation of power from 1478 to 1458 BC?

The key here is that the reading, research and eventual writing of the essay shaped the final research question so that the entire process was organic in nature, changing and adapting to suit where the work John did was taking him.





Worksheet: Design your own research question

A. General areas of interest

1. Which subjects have you really enjoyed?

Subject A:	Subject B:	Subject C:

2. Which *topic areas* or *themes* or *periods* have you been intrigued by within these subject areas?

Topic(s), Theme(s) or Period(s)	Topic(s), Theme(s) or Period(s)	Topic(s), Theme(s) or Period(s)



B. Applying limiting factors

Use the tables below as needed to refine your original titles into a workable research question. Refer to pages 10–12 for examples as to how this can be done. Please note that you must end up with a question and not a title as per the new IB rules governing the Extended Essay (2016 onwards).

Subject:	
Original question/title	
Limiting factor: Highlight or list the terms that can be limited.	
Refined question/title	
Limiting factor: Highlight or list the terms that can be limited.	
Refined question/title	
Limiting factor: Highlight or list the terms that can be limited.	
Refined question:	

C. Feasibility check

Does your research question pass the following feasibility checks?

Feasibility check	Tick
1. Are there sufficient primary sources available (if appropriate)?	
2. Are there sufficient secondary sources available (if appropriate)?	
3. Can you access the sources in your location?	
4. Do you have all the materials necessary to carry out your investigation at hand (for example, chemicals)?	
5. Do you have all the equipment necessary to carry out your investigation at hand (for example, lab or computer equipment)?	
6. Can you access the materials and equipment in your location (that is, have you gained necessary permissions)?	
7. Can you begin your research immediately (for example, you do not need to defer your research until the summer when you will visit X or Y place)?	
8. Your research question (or title) can be assessed against the Extended Essay criteria? See Chapter 7: Assessment for more on pages 101–38.	
9. The chosen research methods or concepts underpinning your research question are relevant and appropriate to the subject?	
10. Does your research meet all of the IB's ethical guidelines on research and fieldwork? (See pages 18–19 for the list of guidelines.)	