

A DECISION GUIDE · IB DIPLOMA

# The IB *Cluster.*

*A reference framework on Higher Level selection, Theory of Knowledge, and the Extended Essay.*



**A** working framework for families navigating the IB Diploma Programme. Distilled from three Harland Review editorials covering the decisions that shape an IB candidacy. Written for parents and students who want the substance without reading three full editorials.

# Five decisions that shape an IB Diploma.

---

*The IB Diploma is a tightly designed program. The decisions a family makes about subject selection, core components, and timing carry through the full two years. Each is answered in the framework that follows.*

---

- 01 Which Higher Level subjects to choose, and what the choice closes off.

---

  - 02 How Theory of Knowledge is graded, and what students are being asked to do.

---

  - 03 When to start the Extended Essay, and what the realistic timeline looks like.

---

  - 04 How the reformed Extended Essay structure (first assessed May 2027) changes preparation.

---

  - 05 How selective universities read an IB transcript.
-

### Decision 01

## Choosing Higher Level subjects.

*The most consequential decision in the IB Diploma is not the final score. It is the Higher Level subject grid. Selective universities read the HL transcript first.*

Of the six subjects an IB student takes, three are at Higher Level (HL) and three at Standard Level (SL). The HL subjects determine which university programs the student can apply to and how their candidacy is read by admissions committees. Specific prerequisites are non-negotiable: UK and Singapore medical programs require HL Chemistry, with HL Biology required at UCL Medicine, Cambridge, and NUS Medicine. Engineering programs typically require HL Mathematics. Without the right HL subjects, the door to those programs is closed at the application stage, regardless of total score.

The choice also shapes what happens at competitive thresholds. Cambridge specifies an IB total of 41–42 with 776 at HL. The HL grid is what makes that achievable or not.

**The practical question is not "what is the highest score this student can get," but "which HL grid keeps the right doors open."** That question gets answered at the start of Year 1, before the work of preparing for assessments begins.

Drawn from "Choosing IB Diploma Subjects," The Harland Review, March 18, 2026.



### Decision 02

## Understanding Theory of Knowledge.

*Theory of Knowledge looks like philosophy. It functions like a writing course. It is a load-bearing component of the Diploma core, not an elective.*

TOK is one of the three core components of the IB Diploma, alongside the Extended Essay and Creativity, Activity, Service. Students complete approximately 100 hours of TOK across the two-year program, assessed through a 1,600-word essay (67% of the grade) and an exhibition of three real-world objects (33%).

TOK and the Extended Essay combine through the Diploma points matrix to award up to 3 bonus points on top of the 42 available from six subjects. The matrix penalizes weakness: a grade C in both TOK and EE earns 1 point, a D in both earns 0, and a grade E in either is a failing condition for the Diploma.

**The risk parents should understand is that TOK is often treated as a course you cannot prepare for, until late in Year 2 when grades are returning poorly.** The course rewards a particular kind of structured argumentative writing that students can practice from the start.

Drawn from "Theory of Knowledge Explained," The Harland Review, April 22, 2026.

*Decision 03*

## When to start the Extended Essay.

*The Extended Essay is a 4,000-word independent research paper. It looks like a Year 2 task and functions like a Year 1 task done badly.*

The realistic Extended Essay timeline begins in Year 1 with topic exploration and supervisor allocation, transitions to active research over the summer between Year 1 and Year 2, and finishes drafting and revision in the first term of Year 2. Students who start substantive research in Year 2 typically run out of time and submit work that does not reflect their capability.

The supervised hours allocated by the IBO (typically 3 to 5 hours of one-to-one supervision) are not enough to teach research skills from scratch. They are designed for a student who already has a viable topic and is working through structural and analytical problems.

**The work that pays off is done before the formal EE process begins.** Reading widely in a chosen subject area during Year 1, narrowing toward a research question, and learning what an academic argument looks like in that field.

Drawn from "The Extended Essay," The Harland Review, April 8, 2026.



*Decision 04*

## Adapting to the reformed EE structure.

*The Extended Essay is being restructured. First assessment May 2027. The new structure changes what students need to be doing now.*

The new EE assessment criteria, published by the IBO for first assessment May 2027, increase the weighting on analytical and evaluative thinking and reduce the weighting on formatting and presentation conventions. The 4,000-word limit remains. The new criteria emphasize the quality of argument over the structure of the document.

For students currently in Year 1 of the Diploma (sitting examinations May 2027), this means the work that builds toward EE success looks different from what worked under the outgoing structure. Reading deeply in the chosen subject and developing an analytical position matter more.

**The transition window is the practical concern.** Students sitting May 2026 examinations are assessed under the outgoing criteria. Students sitting May 2027 onward are assessed under the new criteria. Schools and students unsure which criteria apply risk preparing for the wrong rubric.

Drawn from "The Extended Essay," The Harland Review, April 8, 2026.

# How the transcript reads.

---

## *Decision 05*

### How selective universities read the IB transcript.

*The total score matters less than parents typically assume. The HL grid, the bonus points, and the prerequisite subjects do most of the work.*

The IB Diploma score is reported out of 45: up to 42 points from six subject grades (1 to 7 each) plus up to 3 bonus points from the TOK and EE matrix. Selective universities read this transcript with three filters: prerequisites, HL subject quality, and the total at the margin.

Prerequisites come first. Without HL Chemistry, a candidate cannot apply to most accredited medical programs in the UK or Singapore. Without HL Mathematics at the right level (Analysis and Approaches HL is generally preferred for engineering), engineering programs are similarly out of reach. These are filters, not preferences.

HL subject quality comes second. Three HL subjects at scores of 6 or 7 in subjects relevant to the intended program signal capability. Three HLs at 5 in unrelated subjects signal a different kind of candidate. Universities tend to publish HL-specific thresholds (Cambridge specifies 776 at HL) precisely because the HL transcript is what they read.

Total score and bonus points come third. Once the HL grid is right and the prerequisites are met, the total decides at the margin. Bonus points from TOK and EE can move a candidate from 39 to 42 or from 41 to 44, which can be the difference between an offer and a near-miss at universities where competition concentrates around specific score bands.

**The practical takeaway is to think about the IB transcript the way admissions officers read it.** HL choice is the structural decision. TOK and EE are the bonus-point decision. Subject grades are the calibration decision. The total is the consequence of all three.

Synthesized across all three editorials in this guide.



FOR THE FULL DISCUSSION

# The editorials behind this guide.

---

*This guide distills three editorials from The Harland Review. The full discussions cover the structural reasoning, the local picture for Taipei IB Diploma schools, and the patterns we see at Harland.*

---

IB DIPLOMA · MARCH 18, 2026 · 16-MINUTE READ

## Choosing IB Diploma Subjects

[harland.com.tw/harland-review/choosing-ib-diploma-subjects/](https://harland.com.tw/harland-review/choosing-ib-diploma-subjects/)

---

IB DIPLOMA · APRIL 8, 2026 · 18-MINUTE READ

## The Extended Essay

[harland.com.tw/harland-review/extended-essay/](https://harland.com.tw/harland-review/extended-essay/)

---

IB DIPLOMA · APRIL 22, 2026 · 13-MINUTE READ

## Theory of Knowledge Explained

[harland.com.tw/harland-review/tok-explained/](https://harland.com.tw/harland-review/tok-explained/)

---



*If your family is weighing one of these decisions.*

The decisions in this guide are the kind that benefit from a conversation. Our Student Coordinator speaks regularly with families navigating Higher Level selection, Extended Essay planning, and TOK preparation. To start a conversation, visit [harland.com.tw/contact/](https://harland.com.tw/contact/).