

# Top 10 Mistakes to Avoid on the History IA

## IB History of the Americas

### 10. Choosing an Inappropriate Topic:

A bad research question almost always leads to a bad paper. Be very careful when choosing your research question. The IA is a “Historical Investigation.” Ideally, you should choose a topic around which there is debate among historians. Avoid “is water wet?” questions that have obvious answers. Also watch out for descriptive questions that don’t lend themselves to analysis. In addition to all this, your topic should be (1) in the discipline of history; (2) at least ten years in the past; (3) one that can be adequately treated in under 2,000 words; (4) a question for which you have access to adequate sources, and (5) something that you’re truly interested in.

### 9. Failing to Structure the IA Using the Six Parts Outlined in the IA Overview:

The Internal Assessment is a “Historical Investigation.” This is not a traditional research paper. Basically, you will pose a historical question, and then walk the grader through the process that a historian would use to answer that question. Although it is a valuable exercise, it is admittedly an artificial format that you are unlikely to ever see again in your academic career. The IA is NOT holistically graded. It is divided into six separate sections, each of which is assigned a grade. If you put something in the wrong section (such as describing evidence in the analysis section), then you won’t receive any points for it. Consequently, it is important that you clearly identify each section with subheadings. Another key difference between the IA and a research paper is that you will not include a thesis statement in Part A. In Part A, you merely pose a research question. Your answer to that question will gradually take form as you proceed through the other parts. In this case, your thesis statement or main argument would appear in the conclusion. This is exactly the opposite of what you would do in any IB essay, or in a traditional college term paper.

## **8. Omitting Key Information in Part A:**

Students should remember to actually include their research question in Part A. Also don't forget to include the **scope** and **methodology** that your paper will use. Explain exactly what topic, time period, and region(s) will be included in the IA. Also explain the rationale for these choices. Generalize about the types of sources and the method that will be used to analyze them. For example, explain if your paper relies heavily on a particular set of sources. Also identify any specific methods (e.g. oral history or quantitative research). Be succinct in Part A. Don't waste a lot of your words here. While this section is only worth 3 points, they should be relatively easy to get provided that you clearly outline the question, the scope and the method.

## **7. Failing to Properly Cite Sources:**

Failing to include citations will lead to a heavy point deduction in Part B. Omitting a bibliography or works cited brings an automatic two-point deduction in Part F. While you may use any citation style (e.g. APA, Chicago, MLA, Turabian, etc.), you must consistently and accurately apply that style. We recommend **MLA style** because that is what our English teachers use. You must use in-text citations, footnotes, or end notes (depending on the style you've chosen). You must cite anything that you quote or paraphrase (summarize in your own words) from your sources. Very general information that is considered "common knowledge" (including facts from encyclopedias or survey textbooks) does not have to be cited provided that it is not a direct quote. While we are on the subject, remember that encyclopedia articles (especially Wikipedia) are not specific or academic enough to be used as major sources for this project.

## **6. Plagiarizing:**

Plagiarism occurs when one uses, intentionally or unintentionally, someone else's words or ideas without giving them credit.<sup>1[1]</sup> You must cite any direct quotes. You must also provide citations when you paraphrase someone else's ideas in your own words. Obviously, you should NEVER copy large sections of someone else's work and pass them off as your own. The IA graders do check your sources. Each year at Binghamton High School we usually catch 1 or 2 IA rough drafts that have been at least partially plagiarized. This is a serious matter. It falls under

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<sup>1[1]</sup> "Plagiarism: What It Is and How to Avoid It," *Writing Tutorial Services*. Indiana University, Bloomington. April 2004.

< <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml> > (December 31, 2012).

the heading of “Academic Malpractice” which could result in disciplinary and/or academic penalties including the loss of IB credit or even disqualification from the IB Diploma. See [Section E of the General Regulations for IB Diploma Program](#) for details about Academic Malpractice. See [“Plagiarism: What It Is and How to Avoid It”](#) for more details and examples of plagiarism.

## **5. Using Short Bullets in Part B Instead of Writing in Paragraphs:**

While students are technically allowed to use bullets in Part B, you should be very careful about doing this. You should always write in complete sentences. Using too many bullets leads to very choppy writing. If you absolutely insist on them, then use a limited number of bullets as sub-headings. Chunk your evidence into categories. Each bullet should represent a category. Then write a paragraph summarizing the evidence. In the end, these bullets would function a lot like a strong topic sentence for the paragraph.

## **4. Not Analyzing Origins, Purpose, Values & Limitations for 2 Sources in Part C:**

There are a couple of common pitfalls related to Part C (Evaluation of Sources). In this section, you should pick **TWO** sources to analyze in greater depth. You should NOT attempt to analyze more than two sources here. Ideally you will use your two best, most important sources. If you have many strong sources, sometimes it is a good idea to pick one major primary source and one important secondary source. This approach allows you to discuss general differences between these types of sources. Part C is relatively formulaic. You must explicitly analyze the origins, purpose, values, and limitations of each source. That means that the grader is looking for a total of **8** elements. Make it crystal clear exactly what you’re doing in each part. I recommend using one paragraph for each source. It is O.K. to literally say “the main purpose of this source is to...” Students often forget to analyze origins and purpose. Don’t forget the obvious. What type of source is it? (Is it a primary or secondary source? Is it a biography, a monograph, a diary, an oral history, or something else?) Why was it written? For what audience was it originally intended? Most students do a decent job explaining values. With regard to limitations, it is not enough to state that a source is “biased.” All sources have strengths and weaknesses. All speak from particular points of view. Instead, explain how and why the source has bias. Check out my [“Sourcing... IB Style”](#) handout for more details about analyzing the origins, purpose, values, and limitations. Also take a look at my [“Types of Historical Sources”](#) handout for descriptions of various types of historical sources.

### **3. Confusing Description of Evidence with Analysis:**

Apart from choosing a bad research question, the single most costly mistake students make is to confuse “description of evidence” with analysis. This is because analysis is really hard to do well. Even advanced college students sometimes struggle with it. The problem is made worse by the artificial format imposed by the IA. Most practicing historians introduce some evidence, and then analyze it before introducing even more evidence. In the IA, however, you are expected to introduce evidence mainly in Part B. Your analysis of that evidence must occur in Part D. If you put something in the wrong spot, the grader can’t give you full credit for it. I’ve tried to outline below exactly what should be in each part:

**Part B: Description of Evidence:** In this part, you should include the basic facts related to your question. You should provide a **narrative** of **who** was involved, **what** happened, and **when** (in what sequence) the events occurred. You could also use this section to **summarize** the position taken by various authors or schools of historiography. You should NOT attempt to explain why these events happened or evaluate the validity of those interpretations; this will be done in Part D. Of course, the savvy IB student knows that many facts are little more than interpretations around which there is complete consensus. Even basic facts like the name of a time period (e.g. “Critical Period,” “Civil War,” or “Progressive Era”), or the decision to periodize history a certain way are implicit interpretations. So there is some inevitable overlap between Parts B and D, but don’t drive yourself crazy. You can get around this by introducing these labels in Part B, but breaking down their implicit meaning in Part D.

**Part D: Analysis:** This section is tough. Many students make the mistake of simply describing more evidence here. Analysis is “the process of studying or examining something in detail in order to understand it or explain it.” Analysis typically involves breaking down interpretations by critically examining the evidence on which they are based. Analysis can also involve the reverse of this process (critically evaluating evidence in order to support your own interpretation). In history, any of the following activities constitute analysis:

- o **Comparing and contrasting**, differences and similarities.
- o Explaining **causation** (e.g. differentiating between long-term and short-term causes, ranking causes in terms of their relative importance).
- o **Historicizing** (interpreting sources within their historical context)
- o **Critically evaluating** the validity of primary sources or secondary interpretations
- o Questioning the validity of labels or decisions about **periodization**,
- o Examining historical choices.
- o Exploring **counterfactual questions** (what might have been, had things been different) while also acknowledging the limits of such speculation.

## **2. Exceeding the 2,000 Word Limit:**

It is important that the IA be at least 1,500 words, but no longer than 2,000 words. Exceeding the 2,000 word limit brings an automatic two-point deduction in Part F. While there is no automatic penalty for an IA that is under 1,500 words, in most cases IAs that are too short score very poorly. The word count should be written on the cover page. This count excludes citations and the bibliography. Most word processing programs will count the words for you.

## **1. Forgetting to Have Someone Help You Proofread/Edit:**

This last tip should be self-evident, but so many students neglect it. Leave yourself plenty of time to complete this assignment. I recommend working on it gradually over the duration of the entire course. Do not cram the entire writing process into one day (or worse yet, one night)! Try to complete your rough draft well in advance of the deadline. Ask someone else (a peer, an English teacher, or a parent) to proofread your paper. While they may be unfamiliar with the format and grading scheme, they will be able to point out grammatical problems, typos, and parts of text that are unclear.

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