

Psychology—Frequently asked questions (first assessment 2027)

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Diploma Programme

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The International Baccalaureate aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.

To this end the organization works with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programmes of international education and rigorous assessment.

These programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right.



IB learner profile

The aim of all IB programmes is to develop internationally minded people who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world.

As IB learners we strive to be:

INQUIRERS

We nurture our curiosity, developing skills for inquiry and research. We know how to learn independently and with others. We learn with enthusiasm and sustain our love of learning throughout life.

KNOWLEDGEABLE

We develop and use conceptual understanding, exploring knowledge across a range of disciplines. We engage with issues and ideas that have local and global significance.

THINKERS

We use critical and creative thinking skills to analyse and take responsible action on complex problems. We exercise initiative in making reasoned, ethical decisions.

COMMUNICATORS

We express ourselves confidently and creatively in more than one language and in many ways. We collaborate effectively, listening carefully to the perspectives of other individuals and groups.

PRINCIPLED

We act with integrity and honesty, with a strong sense of fairness and justice, and with respect for the dignity and rights of people everywhere. We take responsibility for our actions and their consequences.

OPEN-MINDED

We critically appreciate our own cultures and personal histories, as well as the values and traditions of others. We seek and evaluate a range of points of view, and we are willing to grow from the experience.

CARING

We show empathy, compassion and respect. We have a commitment to service, and we act to make a positive difference in the lives of others and in the world around us.

RISK-TAKERS

We approach uncertainty with forethought and determination; we work independently and cooperatively to explore new ideas and innovative strategies. We are resourceful and resilient in the face of challenges and change.

BALANCED

We understand the importance of balancing different aspects of our lives—intellectual, physical, and emotional—to achieve well-being for ourselves and others. We recognize our interdependence with other people and with the world in which we live.

REFLECTIVE

We thoughtfully consider the world and our own ideas and experience. We work to understand our strengths and weaknesses in order to support our learning and personal development.

The IB learner profile represents 10 attributes valued by IB World Schools. We believe these attributes, and others like them, can help individuals and groups become responsible members of local, national and global communities.

Research methods

What counts as a research method in International Baccalaureate (IB) psychology?

In the Diploma Programme (DP) *Psychology guide*, table 3.4 specifies the list of six research methods: experiments, observations, surveys/questionnaires, interviews, correlational studies and case studies. Different types within the same research method (such as true experiments and quasi-experiments; structured interviews and semi-structured interviews) do not count as different research methods for examination purposes. For example, if the question asks students to suggest one alternative or additional research method, suggesting a semi-structured interview as an alternative to a structured interview will not be accepted.

What is accepted as an additional research method in paper 2 section A (class practicals) and the internal assessment?

Paper 2 section A (class practicals) and the internal assessment component require students to suggest an additional research method to investigate the same topic. Both class practicals and the internal assessment are expected to use one of four research methods: experiment, observation, survey/questionnaire or interview/focus group. These would be acceptable choices to answer the questions about additional research methods. However, appropriate alternative research methods (such as correlational studies and case studies) will also be credited.

Subject matter

Why have cultural and environmental factors been separated in some areas of study?

There are two parts in the course where environmental influences appear in addition to cultural factors.

- Health and well-being: Cultural differences and environmental factors
- Learning and cognition: Cultural factors in cognitive processes and environmental influences on cognitive processes

In these contexts, “environmental influences” refer to specific non-cultural factors that affect behaviour or cognition. For example, environmental influences on cognitive processes could include malnutrition, poverty, ecological quality, childhood trauma or stressful experiences.

Why is cognitive dissonance listed under the sociocultural approach to behaviour in the guide (table 3.3) rather than under the cognitive approach?

Cognitive dissonance may be understood as a phenomenon at the intersection between mental and social processes. It involves individual internal mental conflict, but it is also often shaped by social influences, and it is linked to social behaviour. Note that the heading cognitive dissonance is listed under in the guide does not intend to affect examination questions and must not impact how these are answered.

Paper 1: Teaching and assessment

What counts as an “example” in paper 1 section A?

In the “External assessment” section, the *Psychology guide* states that, “Examples may be a research study or a real or hypothetical situation”. These are equally acceptable.

In the new syllabus (first assessment 2027), students can still use research studies as examples to support their answers; however, knowledge of the details of these studies is no longer assessed. A non-study example could be a situation that illustrates the psychological idea in question.

Importantly, the example must be relevant to the question and contain essential elements of the psychological idea being explained. For instance, simply saying “training circus animals” is too superficial to illustrate operant conditioning. A stronger example would describe how animals are trained using planned schedules of rewards and punishments. The situation can be real (something that actually happened) or hypothetical (something that could realistically happen). In this context, “hypothetical” does not mean “made up”—it means that the details like who, when and where are not specified.

Is there a need for an example or a study in paper 1 section C?

The assessment rubric for paper 1 section C does not require the use of an example or a research study. However, psychology is best taught and learned through examples and research. To apply conceptual reasoning effectively, students will most likely need to be exposed to research, examples and practical applications. This will help them respond to questions related to concepts such as measurement, bias, change and responsibility.

It is important to note that there is a large variety of possible questions that can be asked, combining key concepts and areas of study. Not all of these combinations will benefit in the same way from using a specific example or a specific research study (for example, compare a question about measurement in compliance techniques with a question about responsibility in investigating biological explanations of mental health disorders). This is why the use of studies or examples is not an assessment criterion, but using them to support an answer is a valuable choice.

According to the *Psychology teacher support material*, in paper 1 section C, each of the six concepts can be combined with any area of study in the contexts, but the guide suggests that only three to four concepts should be explored for each context. What is the correct guidance here?

It is correct that all six concepts may be combined with all areas of study from all four contexts in examinations, but it does not mean that each of these combinations should be explicitly taught. In fact, it would be counterproductive to do so.

Students should be able to demonstrate transfer of learning in addressing the prompt. For example, consider the question, “One claim in the psychology of health and well-being is that a single perspective is not enough to explain mental health. Discuss this claim with reference to one biological explanation of one or more disorders”. Even if a teacher covered the concept of perspective in the health and well-being context, they may not have covered this specific example. Students need to use their understanding of the concept (acquired while learning about other areas of study) and apply their knowledge to the prompt. Students should be able to apply their knowledge of a concept to any of these prompts, even if it was not explicitly covered in class.

What counts as prescribed content? Is content assessed in paper 1 section C?

The *Psychology guide* uses the word “content” to denote psychological terminology and learning objectives that fall under biological, cognitive and sociocultural approaches to behaviour. These are all provided in tables 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 of the guide. This content is prescribed because students need to know it for paper 1 sections A and B.

There are also areas of study grouped into “contexts”. These are all provided in tables 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.5, 4.6, 4.8, 4.9, 4.11 and 4.12 of the guide. For example, “attachment” is an area of study within the context of human development. Knowledge of these areas of study is assessed in paper 1 section C, so they are also prescribed.

There is a lot of overlap between content and areas of study in the contexts. For example, social identity theory appears in table 4.8 of the guide as part of human relationships and also in table 3.3 as part of the sociocultural approach to behaviour. Teachers might want to use this overlap to teach content in a way that is integrated into contexts. Nevertheless, some areas of study—for example, theory of mind in human development—are specific to certain contexts.

Please also refer to the *Psychology teacher support material* (see the “External assessment” section) for details of how paper 1 will be assessed.

In a question about human behaviour, is there the option for students to use animal research and link this to human behaviour?

Most questions will ask students about human behaviour. However, animal research is important and often informs our understanding of human behaviour. The *Psychology guide* defines psychology as “the scientific study of human and animal cognition and behaviour” (see the “Nature of the subject” section). Therefore, both animal and human research or examples will be equally acceptable when answering a question, even if it specifies “human behaviour”.

Each of the six concepts in the examination can be combined with any of the areas of study under the four contexts. That’s 38 areas of study in total, which gives us 228 possible combinations. This is too much material to teach!

It is incorrect and counterproductive to treat these combinations as content to be specifically taught. The course is not designed for students to learn every possible pairing explicitly.

First, no extra content is needed to link the six concepts to the areas of study. The concepts are broad enough to apply to any area.

For example, if students have learned about social learning theory and the Bandura et al. (1961) study (the Bobo doll experiment), they can adjust their focus depending on the concept in the question.

- Causality: This was a true experiment so it supports cause-and-effect conclusions—but there are limitations to consider.
- Perspective: Social learning theory supports the sociocultural perspective, showing how behaviour is influenced by others, but also includes cognitive elements like identifying with the model.
- Change: Social learning can be used to change behaviour by providing models and using reinforcement or punishment.
- Responsibility: There are ethical concerns in the study and in research on social influence more broadly.

Second, teachers often find that they do not need to teach each concept explicitly for every area of study. These understandings are transferable. For example, if students have practised analysing ethical issues in one study, they can apply that skill to other studies—even ones they have not encountered before.

The goal is to help students build flexible, conceptual understandings that they can apply elsewhere. Instead of trying to predict examination questions, the focus should be on preparing students to respond to questions they have not seen before.

How many research studies do we need to teach?

This question is misleading. In paper 1 (sections A and C), students may want to use research studies to support their responses, but detailed knowledge of the research studies is not assessed in these components. In paper 1 section A, students may choose to use an example rather than a research study. In paper 1 section C, the assessment rubric refers to “relevant knowledge and understanding of the area of study/concept” (see the “External assessment” section of the guide), so it is knowledge of the area of study that is required, with no explicit requirement to use a research study.

However, psychology is best understood through research, and students need to understand research considerations for other assessment components. Many teachers use research studies as the backbone of

their lessons, and many students use research in their responses to support their argument. Students no longer need to demonstrate knowledge of procedural details, so lengthy descriptions of these studies are not necessary. With no requirement to remember the details, some teachers will take this as an opportunity to discuss more research studies in class—not for memorization, but to expose students to different scenarios.

Should a student choose to use a research study to support the answer, only one is required in paper 1 section A. One study is also enough for paper 1 section C, although full marks can be gained with no studies at all or with more than one study. It is important that the requirements of the question are fully addressed.

Can paper 1 section A be based on research methodology? It is technically a content area, but it is assessed elsewhere in the assessment model.

As stated in the *Psychology guide*, paper 1 section A has questions that assess knowledge of content from two of the three content areas (biological, cognitive, sociocultural). Research methodology will be the focus of other assessment components, such as paper 2 section A.

Paper 2: Class practicals

How do we spend 30 hours on the class practicals if they are to be completed in class time? The nature of the tasks seems far simpler than this time allocation.

The 30 hours allocated can also be used to consider alternative or additional methods (question 4 in paper 2 section A) and to teach research methods and ethics in general, and practise writing sections for the internal assessment proposal. The allocated hours given in the guide are suggestions, and teachers can decide to allocate hours slightly differently.

Would conducting the research proposed for the internal assessment component as part of a class practical be considered double-dipping?

It is best not to treat the internal assessment and class practicals as related tasks. The internal assessment and class practicals promote different aspects of learning. The class practicals provide students with hands-on experience in conducting a psychological study. They are meant to be simple so students can try using research methodology. The internal assessment should address a real-life problem in a real-life population of interest. The internal assessment is a research proposal, so students do not have to be limited by logistical constraints in considering how to address the real-life problem.

The internal assessment proposal and the class practical may be based on the same topic, but they should not be the same study.

Do teacher-run experiments count as class practicals?

Yes. The *Psychology guide* states that class practicals can be teacher and/or student led.

Internal assessment

Can two students carry out the internal assessment on the same problem and collaborate?

No. The *Psychology teacher support material* specifies that the internal assessment is a student's individual work. The key skill being assessed is the ability to identify a practical problem (relevant to a population of interest) and propose a solution to it. It is an individual thinking process. Collaboration would raise concerns about academic integrity—for example, it would be unclear who came up with the idea or selected the population of interest.

In the “Data collection” section of the internal assessment, students are expected to discuss potential challenges, so should they refer to the research they have chosen? If not, what is expected from the students?

No. There is no requirement to refer to the existing research that the students have selected (the two research findings they report in the introduction).

When students create a data collection tool, they need to be aware of potential challenges that they will have to navigate. For example, a potential challenge in creating a questionnaire could be the possibility of acquiescence bias—the tendency of participants to agree with any statement they are asked about. To counteract this, students could make sure the questionnaire contains an equal split of directly scored items and reverse-scored items. So, understanding the general principle of designing a questionnaire is sufficient and there is no need to reference background research.

Please clarify what needs to be included in the appendix of the internal assessment.

The appendix needs to contain the data collection tool. The *Psychology guide* states that “Students are not required to provide completed material beyond the data collection tool. For example, there is no requirement for an informed consent form or standardized instructions” (see the “Internal assessment” section). The assessment rubrics make no reference to materials included in the appendices.

In general, teachers and students should use common sense. Sometimes, students may need to include extra materials in the appendix to make their proposed study clear. If the proposed study involves specific materials—such as images used alongside a questionnaire—it may be helpful to include examples in the appendix. However, as examiners are not required to review the appendix, any essential information must be clearly described in the main body of the report.

The internal assessment requires students to create a data collection tool. While it is clear what this would mean in an interview, observation or survey, what would a data collection tool be in an experiment?

The data collection tool in an experiment is the procedure used to measure the dependent variable, including any materials involved. This will vary from study to study. In some experiments, the measurement of the dependent variable involves only one parameter (for example, whether or not the participant helped a stranger). Other experiments may have more sophisticated measurement (such as the number of words from a list correctly recalled or the number of ideas from a paragraph correctly reproduced).

The requirement of a minimum of five items in the measurement tool does not apply to experiments. The procedure of measuring the dependent variable and the materials used (if any) need to be clearly described and justified in the context of the proposed experimental study.

Can students use an existing survey in the internal assessment?

No. It is important that the data collection tool is created. While existing surveys can be a part of a student's proposal, students will also have to add their own survey as part of the proposed investigation and explain how it was created.

The *Psychology guide* states that the student should create the data collection tool for the internal assessment. How much originality are we expecting? Can students base their tool on an existing tool?

The expectations for students completing their internal assessment are in line with what is authentic practice, which sometimes involves the reuse of questions or sourcing them from previous published studies. Reusing some questions is allowed, as long as the student creates most of the data tool and clearly references the reused items in line with the IB academic integrity policy. It shows the ability of a student to select, repurpose and adapt materials critically for the purpose of their work.

Paper 3: Higher level extensions

Higher level (HL) extensions include “examples of areas of inquiry” (tables 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 in the guide). Do these need to be taught?

No. HL extensions are meant to be taught with an inquiry-driven approach and do not have prescribed content. The examples of areas of inquiry provided in tables 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 in the guide are suggestions only. Teachers do not have to use them and are welcome to craft their own.

What is meant by “their own knowledge” in paper 3 question 4 of the “External assessment” section of the guide?

This is where students’ background knowledge related to the HL extensions is assessed. “Own knowledge” does not refer to any specific theories, ideas or studies but rather the students’ overall understanding of the area and existing challenges.

Paper 3 is based on several sources collated to assess a given claim. The sources and the claim align with one of the HL extensions in one of the contexts (for example, technology in human relationships). We cannot predict exactly what the claim will be or what the sources will be about. Therefore, the background knowledge that would be helpful is something that students could transfer to any situation. For example, students may consider the typical challenges that exist in investigating the role of technology in human relationships. Then, no matter what the sources are, students will be able to apply their own knowledge to analysing the claim. Students should understand the HL extensions conceptually rather than in a way that implies memorization of content.

How can we find or create paper 3 booklets to prepare HL students for paper 3?

Paper 3 is an HL-only examination that assesses data analysis, interpretation and HL extensions. It is based on a resource booklet with data and findings that students need to answer questions about.

Preparation for paper 3 should focus on giving students regular practice of analysing and interpreting data from psychological research. Apart from using existing resources provided by various publishers and community networks, the following can be recommended.

- Develop materials in the style of paper 3 based on studies that you use in class.
- Create several high-quality booklets and use them as prompts for artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted generation of more examples. Always make sure you follow the IB academic integrity policy and perform a final review and edit yourself.
- Ask your students to create a paper 3 booklet as part of their class assignment.
- Consider developing original research scenarios tailored to your teaching context, rather than relying on existing published studies. This approach may offer greater flexibility and efficiency.

Other

Can we understand the glossary of terms as the prescriptive content that students would need to, at a minimum, be able to explain and apply by the end of the two-year DP psychology programme?

No. The glossary at the end of the *Psychology guide* is not prescribed content nor a set way of defining terms.

Will some planning time be allowed in the examination for students to think about their response?

Planning time is already built into the duration of each paper. There is no separate or fixed time set aside just for planning, where students can read the question but not write. Instead, students manage their own time. Some may choose to plan before writing, while others may begin writing and pause to plan as they go. It is up to each student to decide how to use the time provided.

How much knowledge about calculating inferential statistics do HL students need to have?

HL students do not need to be able to calculate inferential statistics. However, they should understand the principles of significance and probability and what correlation coefficients mean, so that they can analyse data and explain and evaluate findings in the paper 3 sources. The scope of inferential statistics for HL students is specified in the updated *Psychology guide* (see the “Syllabus content” section).

References

Bandura, A., Ross, D., & Ross, S. A. (1961). Transmission of aggression through imitation of aggressive models. *Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology*, 63(3), 575–582. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0045925>