The IB Internal Assessment

The Internal Assessment (IA) is unique to the International Baccalaureate. It is not a component of the Advanced Placement, the GCSE, or any other curriculum that I am aware of. The IA can be a paper, project, oral exam, workbook, or series of experiments, depending on the individual IB class. The IA is heavily criterion-referenced and is marked internally by the course instructor. The IB then selects a sample of all completed IA’s per class and these are forwarded to IB Examiners throughout the world for “moderation.” Moderation in this case means reviewing the accuracy of the internal marking. The examiner reviews each IA from the sample and then assigns his mark out of a total number of marks achievable – which varies from course to course. Even though the IA is marked internally by the instructor, it is the moderated mark by the examiner that is awarded to the student. Grades are then extended to all students completing the IA. For example, if a paper is rated internally at a 20 and is moderated at an 18, then all papers rated at a 20 (those not included in the sample) will receive a score of 18. Experienced IB teachers who have been through prior IA moderation are often very accurate criterion-referenced markers. In such cases, the moderator will simply confirm the teacher’s internal marking with an occasional point added or taken away. IB moderators must also deal with the internal marking of inexperienced teachers or those who pay little heed to IB IA criteria. In such cases, the moderator must read the entire sample closely and in effect, “re-mark” the student work. Poor internal marking generally results in inflated grades awarded by the teacher. It is an unfortunate fact the students are severely penalized in moderation when an entire sample is flawed by design or by inaccurate internal marking.

The IA is a unique partnership between the student, the instructor, and the IB examiner. While neither the instructor nor the student ever has contact with the examiner, all are working from the exact set of criteria in constructing, guiding, and evaluating the finished product. One obvious characteristic of the IA is that the student, the instructor, and the school itself have clear control over much of the outcome of the IA. In other words, IA marks will generally be high when the instructor, the student and the available resources align to create a quality product. The more competent the instructor, the more motivated the student, the more subject-specific resources available, the higher the final mark will be. The outcome of IB exams (on the other hand) are controllable only to the extent that the material is adequately covered in breadth and depth and that students have highly developed test-taking skills. Students do not know the exact questions in advance when they sit for IB exams. However, students and instructors are well-aware of IA criteria, and the challenge is then to produce a quality product rather than to try and outguess the IB exam makers. As a consequence, students and instructors must strive to achieve the highest possible marks on the IA (which generally counts from 20% to 40% of the subject grade) in order to offset any problems that may be encountered on the IB exams.

Top-tier public and private IB schools are generally consistent in the quality of their IA samples, across academic disciplines. IB instructors at such schools take great pride in
the high marks their students receive on their internally assessed work. IB Coordinators work hard to achieve internal consistency and high marks on all samples submitted. Top IA scores correlate with high exam marks and also with the Diploma pass-rate. Thus the IA is a solid indicator of the quality of the entire Diploma Program itself. Below the top tier schools, there is often a variation in the quality of IA samples from class to class. While the IBH Theater Arts mean IA score may be a 6 in any given year, the IBH Physics mean score may only be a 3. There are many reasons why IA scores may vary greatly between subjects at a particular school, not the least of which may be the nature of the subject itself. However, in my experience, a competent and knowledgeable IB teacher will consistently produce high IA scores year after year while an inexperienced teacher or one who is lacking in subject knowledge will struggle to produce passing IA scores. Many diplomas are lost each year by students who submit a sub-standard Internal Assessment in one subject or another.

As a past IB teacher and Coordinator and a current IB Examiner, here are my 10 best tips on how to “ace” the Internal Assessment and help insure a top grade in any class:

1. All IA are criterion-referenced, meaning that the Examiner must insure that you satisfy a stated criterion before awarding top points. Criterion points are awarded according to markbands. A typical markband may be from 0-3 points with 3 indicating a fully-met set of criteria and 0 indicating an absence of any reference to the criteria. Know the IB criteria for your particular course – they are available in the IB Subject Guides – and continually review your work to insure that all criteria are being met.

2. Unless your instructor assigns your IA topic, choose your topic very carefully. Examiners often witness the same papers, experiments, and oral arguments year after year. Although the IB does not award points per se for creative and thoroughly original work, examiners will be duly impressed with an inquiry that is vibrant and fresh. Pursuing a boilerplate topic or simply rehashing an old subject does not constitute a meritorious inquiry. As a wise man once said, “you cannot fix by analysis what you ruined by design.”

3. Start your IA early, even before the instructor asks you to begin. Gathering your data or creating your portfolio is a time-consuming process. IA’s begun and finished in the senior year only can be hasty affairs. There are many sound reasons to begin your IA in your junior year and then do the bulk of your work during the summer between grades 11 and 12.

4. Personalize your IA wherever and whenever you can. Become a part of the inquiry itself. Write/present/create with clarity and enthusiasm. Make the examiner understand that the topic of your IA is your passion, regardless of what subject.

5. Consider the IA to be an open-ended rather than a closed inquiry. You don’t need to know how your IA will turn out or what you will conclude until your analysis is
complete. It is one thing to have a focus (essential for the IA) but it is another thing entirely to reach your overall conclusion before collecting your data.

6. Most IA’s whether written or oral ask you to develop your thesis or hypothesis before proceeding with your inquiry. Make certain this foundation statement allows for a legitimate quest rather than a dead-end pursuit. Intending to solve the Kennedy assassination once-and-for-all is doomed to failure. As would be to establish the precise impact of global warming on the world ecology. Don’t be afraid at the end of the IA quest to disprove your own theory or hypothesis. Some of the best IA’s uncover new information that disproves conventional wisdom or prior findings.

7. When you get stuck, ask for help. Sometimes a student gets so wrapped-up in the IA that they fail to see an answer that lays straight ahead. An objective second-opinion from a teacher or peer can keep you from working in isolation or going off on a tangent.

8. Bias is unavoidable but it must be controlled for throughout your inquiry. Personal opinions must also not be passed off as analysis. If your World Religion paper favors one religion over another, you will not earn many points from the examiner. If your Individual Oral Commentary in Humanities asks you to critique Hamlet and you choose to critique The Bard himself because you dislike Shakespeare, you will also lose major points. Empiricism is compromised if you exhibit your biases or prejudices. A personal or political agenda seeping into your work is a recipe for disaster.

9. Use IA templates. Chances are that your IB teacher has examples of winning IA’s from past years. Study these examples to learn what works and what doesn’t for the IA. Your teacher also has access to “Exemplars” of the Internal Assessment that he may download from the IB Online Curriculum Center. These typical examples run the gamut from stellar to mediocre. Most come with Moderator Comments so that you may see exactly where criterion points were won or lost.

10. Finally, the visual presentation that your IA makes is very important. Likewise important is the oral presentation you make on the IOC in Groups 1 and 2. Stylistically, put your best foot forward, whether you are submitting a paper, a portfolio, a project, a presentation or your Group 4 experiments. The closer your work is to publication quality, the more you improve your chances of receiving a high mark.

Now go out there and grab that big “7” on the Internal Assessment!

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