

## A2 Module 5: Researching an Independent Study 2005/06

### **Research methods**

The Independent Study should be an investigative or research-based piece of work based upon either a contemporary media text or texts, or a topic or issue arising out of a contemporary media text or texts.

The extended essay gives you the opportunity to research and/or investigate a topic, issue, text or series of texts within contemporary media. It will be your independent study and the purpose of the study is very clear: it should seek to answer a question, clarify an issue, or test a hypothesis.

Naturally, you will be thinking carefully about the focus or topic of your investigation. You may already have some initial thoughts about the ideas and arguments you will try and demonstrate in your evaluation and analysis.

### **How do I ensure that my research methods and techniques are ‘appropriate’?**

Your extended essay must be **‘textually-centred’** – this means that the study must primarily focus on one or more texts from contemporary media. The text(s) will be the basis for your commentary, analysis and evaluation. Because the study is centered on texts, you will **not** need to questionnaires, surveys and interviews for research. Nor will you be likely to present information in the form of charts, graphs or computer analysis.

A different ‘methodology’ is required for the type of study you will be doing.

1. Remember that the project is **‘text-centred’** – this means that your *argument* or *hypothesis* must be drawn primarily from an analysis/evaluation of the text or texts. Therefore your choice of text(s) will be vital.  
**For example:** if you were interested in researching a comparative analysis of representations of asylum seekers in broadsheet and tabloid newspapers then simply select two examples for close analysis. Don’t overburden yourself with excess material for analysis. Wider issues (such as ideology, media values, institution, values) can then be explored through the texts you have selected.
2. It sounds obvious but make sure the text(s) you use for analysis are clearly **relevant** and **appropriate** to the task you have set yourself.
3. Fully exploit the research opportunities that surround you. The **Internet** can be a terrific source of information and material, but it can also be unreliable. Books and academic journals are still the best sources of research, and earn more marks from examiners: you **must** get to know both the school and your local **library**.
4. Keep records of the origins of the sources you gather – especially if you have downloaded literature from the Internet. This will make it easier for you to state the authorship of secondary material thereby avoiding confusion that could potentially lead to accusations of **plagiarism**.

## ***Planning your essay***

### **1. Find a topic area**

Have a think about what is going on in the media at the moment or in the recent past - there may be a new film which you have heard about coming out in the next couple of months, a big event coming up in the news, or a new album and tour by your favourite band. Whatever you choose, you must be sure that you will be able to collect sufficient materials to write a 3000 word essay about. It should also be something about which you will be able to research background theory. Finally it should be something which will allow you to cover the key concepts.

### **2. Work out a title**

A good essay needs a good title- don't just give it the name of the media texts you are studying - "The development of the Film Batman Begins" but give it a title which will focus your writing around a major theme- "Batman Begins – how did Hollywood rescue a dead film franchise?" A good title such as this points out what is interesting about your topic, but is still wide enough to allow you to cover all of the key concepts.

### **3. Collect materials**

As well as collecting the media texts themselves you should collect as much back-ground research as possible- this could include looking for details about the institutional source of the texts in the library or on the Internet, or looking in text-books for relevant theory.

### **4. Decide how you will cover all of the key concepts**

Your essay **MUST** show that you understand all of the key concepts and have a clear awareness of wider contexts, if you want to get a good mark. It should *focus* on a *selection* of them.

### **5. Make a plan**

In your plan you should make sure that you are tackling all of the key concepts- once again you need to use the list on the next few pages. The key thing is to try to write a plan which fits in the key concepts naturally, rather than having very obvious paragraphs about each of the key concepts in order.

### **6. Write your first draft**

### **7. Re-draft**

Once you've written the first draft, put it aside for a couple of days. Then get it out and read it again, circling all of the spelling, typing and grammatical mistakes you have made. How many sentences go on for a page-and-a-half? Tidy up the draft so that what you present to your teacher represents your "best shot" at that point.

**8. Hand in a completed** draft *together with a bibliography containing details of all the sources you have used* – the media texts you have studied and any background reading you have done.

## **Making research notes**

*The following suggestions are taken from a study skills guide produced for media students at Hurtwood House sixth form in Dorking, Surrey.*

1. When doing research, you will make a large number of notes. You will be required to provide REFERENCES and a BIBLIOGRAPHY for your essay.
2. It might be useful to get a set of cards – postcard size may suffice but many students find A5 size cards ideal. Write your purpose for collecting material clearly on one of the cards – this will stop you straying from the task set. Keep the card in front of you as you search for relevant material at all times.
3. When you have selected relevant information, write it on one side of the card. On the other write:
  - The name of the book/source from which you have got your information.
  - The name of the author
  - The date the work was published

*For example: Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video – John Ellis  
(Routledge, 1982) pp125-135*

4. As you collect information for your cards, file them – shoe boxes are quite useful. When your collection is exhausted, SIFT and SORT the cards into CATEGORIES
5. When you are sifting and sorting, you may find that some collected information does not now seem relevant. File it in another box of ‘spare research’. Do not include irrelevant detail just because you collected it.
6. Looking carefully at the file of your research, decide which order the sections would be best written up in. Don’t attempt to use it all – be selective.
7. Decide which order the cards within each section should be in to produce a good ‘flow’ when written up.
8. At the end, when writing the references and the bibliography, sift and sort the reference side of the cards into alphabetical order.
9. Do not assume that because it is printed in a book, it is a fact. Note who made the comment or report and the point of view. Are they deliberately trying to persuade you? When were the comments made? Are they out of date?
10. Selected extracts may be copied directly into your essay as “quotations”. You may also adapt and paraphrase other ideas that you have read into your essay. However, in BOTH CASES it is VITAL that you include a footnote with a detailed reference.

**If you forget to credit the source of your ideas – if you present other people’s writing or ideas as your own – that is PLAGIARISM. If your teacher catches you plagiarising at any point during the course, you should expect to be withdrawn from this unit, and lose 20% of your A Level grade.**

**If your teacher catches you plagiarising in your final draft, the exam board will usually refuse you permission to sit the A Level at all.**

## FINAL TIPS

1. The aim of the Independent Study is to look at a media text or texts in detail with reference to the Key Concepts and relevant contexts - to see the ways in which it is introduced and placed with an audience, and exploited for that audience.
2. What you should make sure is that you pick something you can manage. For example, if you wanted to look at soap operas, then you should study one soap opera over a short period of time - say four or five episodes. A minimum of one week's output of a soap opera would be the least that could be studied, on the other hand, you would be wasting your time doing anything more than a fortnight's output.
3. Similarly, if you were looking at the coverage of a particular news story then three or four day's examination should be enough. Alternatively, you might want to look at the coverage of a particular story on a number of separate occasions, during a period of one month.
4. Choose a topic that genuinely interests you – it will make the work much more enjoyable. However, *don't* study texts that you *love*. You have to be able to show critical detachment – see the bigger picture.  
***Students who write about their favourite film/movie star/TV series/magazine invariably write bad essays.***
5. In introductions you need to say what you intend to do in the essay, not write a press release style section about how wonderful the text you are studying is.
6. The structure that you use needs to be clearly based on the text or issue and not just follow the key concepts list in order.
7. Use the subject-specific vocabulary you have learned in class wherever it is appropriate. This will impress the examiner, provided it is used correctly!
8. Research the institutional source of your text(s). What this means in practice is that you will need to find out who owns the company that produces it and what else they own in the media. You can find this kind of thing out in the library or on the Internet.