Environmental Systems and Societies

HL | Exam preparation & command terms

Based only on the Introduction, pp. iv–xii

How to use this book

HL

What this revision resource is designed to do

- Use the book as an exam-preparation resource alongside your classroom learning.
- Review the overview of topics, assessment guidance, past-question practice, sample student answers and examiner-style feedback.
- Attempt past questions before reading the sample answers and comments: active engagement is emphasized as the most useful way to revise.
- For HL, revise Topics 1–8 and also connect the three HL lenses to topic content.

Core idea

The book complements teaching; it does not replace the core course content provided by your teacher.

IB principles and approaches to learning

HL

Skills and concepts that support ESS learning

IB learner profile	Approaches to learning	ESS key concepts
Inquirer • knowledgeable • thinker • communicator • principled • open-minded • caring • risk-taker	Thinking • social • communication • self-management • research skills	Perspectives • systems • sustainability

- ESS combines “the sciences” with “individuals and societies”, so ideas should be understood in context rather than as isolated facts.
- Real-world examples from local to global scales strengthen international-mindedness and help connect course ideas.
- The three key concepts help you make connections across the course and develop a holistic view.

Assessment overview

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HL external assessment and weighting

Paper	Duration	Marks	Weighting
Paper 1	2 hours	70	30%
Paper 2	2.5 hours	80	50%
Internal assessment	—	—	20%

What determines the grade?

80% of HL marks come from the two formal written examinations. The remaining 20% comes from the internally assessed investigation.

Papers 1 and 2 assess AO1–AO3. The internal assessment assesses AO1–AO4.

Paper 1

HL

Unseen case study and resource booklet

- Paper 1 is based on a specific unseen case study.
- The resource booklet may include maps, photographs, diagrams, graphs and tables.
- Questions use a range of command terms and require you to analyse and evaluate the supplied data.
- HL Paper 1 contains expanded information and a greater number/range of questions, including HL content.

HL Paper 1

2 hours
70 marks
30% of final grade

Expect more resources and HL content.

Paper 2

HL

Section A + structured essays in Section B

Section A

40 marks at both levels. Includes short-answer and data-based questions. The content differs by level; HL includes HL material.

Section B

40 marks. Answer TWO structured essay questions from a choice of THREE. Each essay has parts (a), (b) and (c).

HL Paper 2: 2.5 hours • 80 marks • 50%

Part (c) of each Section B essay is worth 9 marks and is marked using markbands.

What high-quality ESS work looks like

HL

The grade descriptors focus on five dimensions

Knowledge & understanding	Expression	Examples	Analysis & problem-solving	Practical work
Breadth, accuracy and understanding of ESS concepts/issues	Clear structure and precise ESS terminology	Relevant, well-explained real-world examples	Evaluation, critical reflection and problem solving	Ethical investigation, competent techniques and valid conclusions

For the highest grades, the descriptors emphasize comprehensive understanding, precise terminology, strong examples, insightful evaluation and effective ethical investigations.

Assessment objectives (AO)

HL

What ESS expects you to know and do

AO1 • Knowledge & understanding

Concepts, theories and perspectives; data and data manipulation; methods and models; case studies and real-world examples.

AO2 • Application & analysis

Explain, analyse and develop concepts, data interpretation, methodologies/models, clear arguments and relevant examples.

AO3 • Evaluation & synthesis

Evaluate and synthesize concepts, data, methodologies/models, arguments/solutions and environmental issues in their wider contexts.

AO4 • Skills

Identify an issue and research question; select and use appropriate methods and skills for ethical environmental investigations.

Written papers: AO1–AO3 • Internal assessment: AO1–AO4

Command terms: AO1 and AO2

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Recognize what the question is asking you to do

AO	Term	What it requires
AO1	Define	precise meaning
AO1	Draw	labelled accurate diagram/graph
AO1	Label	add labels
AO1	List	brief sequence; no explanation
AO1	Measure	obtain a value
AO1	State	specific brief answer
AO2	Annotate	brief notes on a diagram/graph
AO2	Apply	use an idea/equation/principle
AO2	Calculate	numerical answer + working
AO2	Describe	detailed account
AO2	Distinguish	make differences clear
AO2	Estimate	approximate value
AO2	Identify	select/provide an answer
AO2	Interpret	recognize trends and draw conclusions
AO2	Outline	brief account or summary

Command terms: AO3 and AO4 (1)

HL

Higher-order thinking and judgement

Term	What it requires
Analyse	break down to reveal essential elements/structure
Comment	give a judgement based on a statement/result
Compare and contrast	similarities AND differences, referring to both throughout
Construct	display information in diagrammatic/logical form
Deduce	reach a conclusion from given information
Demonstrate	make clear through reasoning/evidence/examples
Derive	manipulate a mathematical relationship
Design	produce a plan, simulation or model
Determine	obtain the only possible answer

Command terms: AO3 and AO4 (2)

HL

Longer responses: evidence, balance and conclusions

Discuss

Consider a range of arguments/factors. Present a balanced review, supported by evidence, with a clear conclusion.

Evaluate

Weigh strengths and limitations and reach a supported judgement.

Examine

Explore assumptions and interrelationships within an issue.

Explain

Give a detailed account including reasons or causes.

Justify

Give valid reasons or evidence to support an answer or conclusion.

Predict

Give an expected result using the information provided.

Sketch

Show the general shape/relationship with relevant features and labels.

Suggest

Propose a possible solution, hypothesis or answer; reasons may be needed.

To what extent

Consider the merits and limitations; give a balanced, evidence-based value judgement.

How to approach revision

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Build knowledge, examples, skills and exam technique together

- Use revision methods that work for you: mnemonics, word pictures, acronyms or numbered lists are suggested examples.
- Revision should be thorough: do not omit subtopics.
- Practise diagrams, calculations, data interpretation, case studies and real-world examples—not only definitions.
- Revise command terms together with subject content so you know the depth and type of response required.
- HL priority: integrate environmental law, environmental economics and environmental ethics into Topics 1–8.

Revision principle

Know the content, but also practise how to use it in the form required by the command term.

During the exam: common ways marks are lost

HL

What to watch out for

Avoid these problems

- Poor time management
- Choosing an essay without checking all parts
- Over-generalized examples
- Insufficient factual evidence
- Incorrect or vague ESS terminology
- Misreading the question or its focus

Also avoid

- Misusing command terms
- Errors in mathematical working
- Answers that are too long for the space
- Rushing data-based questions
- Forcing a rehearsed answer onto a different question
- Inventing examples

Five minutes of reading time is allowed before each exam.

Exam checklist

HL

Practical actions before and during each paper

DO

Read the cover instructions
Underline command terms and key words
Plan essays briefly
Use mark weighting to guide detail
Give enough attention to evaluation, discussion and analysis
Answer the correct number of questions
Keep answers legible, numbered and in order

DO NOT

Pad answers with irrelevant content
Leave the examiner to make your conclusion
Bend the question to fit a rehearsed answer
Spend too long on your strongest answer
Invent examples
Rely on lists/bullets when detailed analysis is required

Key features of the book

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How the page features support exam preparation

Question practice

Exam-style/past-paper questions and guidance on how to approach them

Annotated student answers

Real candidate responses with comments showing where marks are gained or missed

Assessment tip

Warnings, revision priorities and exam-technique advice

Concept link

Connections to perspectives, systems and sustainability

Test yourself

Exam-style checks with marks shown

Active learning

Activities using ATL skills

Content link

Connections between related syllabus sections

HL lens link

Links topic content to environmental law, economics and ethics

Worked example

Step-by-step support for calculations

Key terms

Essential syllabus terminology highlighted and defined

HL exam-preparation summary

HL

What to keep in mind from pp. iv–xii

01

Paper 1: 2 h • 70 marks • 30%

02

Paper 2: 2.5 h • 80 marks • 50%

03

IA: 20%

04

Two Section B essays in Paper 2

05

Integrate all three HL lenses across Topics 1–8

06

Use command terms precisely and support higher-mark answers with evidence and judgement

Prepare for the question you are actually asked—not the answer you hoped to write.