

The IB Subject Selection Playbook



From Confusion to Clarity

Choosing your IB subjects is the first—and arguably most important—strategic decision of your Diploma Programme journey. The right combination opens doors to top universities and makes your two years enjoyable; the wrong combination can create unnecessary stress and close academic pathways.

At Lanterna, we have guided over 15,000 IB students to success for more than two decades. This guide, built on the expertise of our 500+ expert IB tutors, is your roadmap to building that perfect lineup.

By the end of this guide, you will be able to:

Distinguish clearly between Higher Level (HL) and Standard Level (SL) workload expectations.

Identify the "Non-Negotiable" subject combinations for major university degree paths (Medicine, Engineering, Economics, etc.).

Use the "Interest-Audit" framework to filter subjects based on your genuine strengths.

Avoid common "Blacklist" subjects that certain universities may not accept for specific courses.

Access our expert subject guides to "preview" the syllabus before you commit.



1. The Architecture: HL vs. SL

The most common question we receive is, "How much harder is HL?" The answer lies in **depth** and **time**.

Feature	Standard Level (SL)	Higher Level (HL)
Recommended Hours	150 teaching hours	240 teaching hours
Curriculum	Covers core concepts. Focuses on breadth.	Covers core + specific HL extension topics. Focuses on depth and complexity.
Assessment	Usually slightly shorter exams.	Longer exams; often requires an additional paper (e.g., Paper 3 in Sciences/Math).
University View	Shows you have a well-rounded education.	Shows you are ready for university-level study in this specific field.

For the standard IB diploma, you must choose **3 HLs** and **3 SLs**. As a standard rule of thumb:

Pick HLs

based on what you want to study at university and what you truly enjoy (you will spend a lot of time on these).

Pick SLs

to balance your workload and maximize your points. Focus on what you are good at.





2. The "University Backwards" Method

Never pick subjects in a vacuum. Always look at what your target university degrees require. Here are the most common "Non-Negotiable" combinations based on global university trends:

Medicine

- **Essential HLs:** Chemistry is almost always required. Biology is usually the second requirement.
- **The Math Factor:** Many top medical schools prefer **Math AA (Analysis & Approaches)**, though some accept Math AI HL. Check specific universities.

Engineering & Physical Sciences

- **Essential HLs:** Physics and **Math AA HL**.
- **The Third HL:** Chemistry (for Chemical Engineering) or Computer Science are popular choices.

Economics & Business

- **Essential HLs:** **Math AA HL** is frequently a hard requirement for pure Economics at top UK/US universities.
- **Recommended:** Economics HL (useful, but surprisingly not always required if you have the Math). History HL is also valued for its essay-writing rigor.

Law & Humanities

- **Essential HLs:** English A (Literature or Lang/Lit) and History.
- **Why?** Law schools want to see evidence of heavy reading, critical analysis, and essay construction.
- **Math/Science:** Usually SL is fine here.

Arts & Architecture

- **Essential HLs:** Visual Arts (for the portfolio) and often Physics (for Architecture specifically).
- **Math:** Math AI or AA at SL is usually sufficient for pure Arts; Architecture may require Math AA.



3. The 10-Minute "Interests-to-Subjects" Audit

If you don't have a specific career in mind, use this worksheet to maximize your points potential. The goal is to find your "High-Yield" subjects—those where you can score high with the least friction.

Step A: The "Flow" List

List the subjects where time passes quickly when you are studying them.

1 _____

2 _____

Step B: The Data Check

Look at your last two years of report cards. Which 3 subjects have the highest average grades?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

Step C: The "Veto" Box (Crucial!)

List subjects you actively dislike. **Never** take a subject you hate at HL just because it "looks good." The IB is too rigorous to survive without motivation.

1 _____

Step D: The Convergence

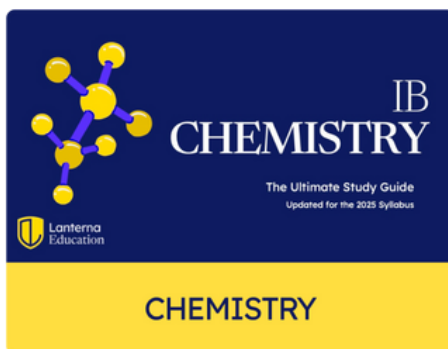
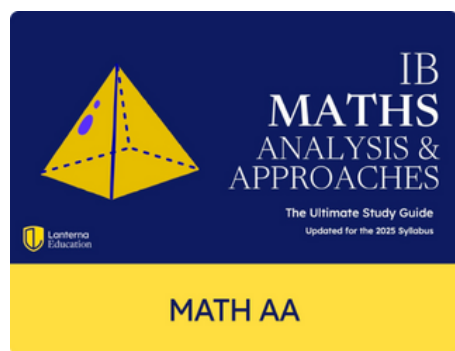
Look at the intersection of **Step A** and **Step B**, remove anything in **Step C**. These are your safest bets for HL.

4. Preview Before You Commit

The syllabus for IB Biology is very different from MYP or GCSE Biology. Before finalizing your choices, we recommend "test-driving" the content.

Our expert Lanterna tutors that scored 7s in the HL subjects they teach have compiled very detailed **free study guides** for the most common subjects. These include:

- Complete breakdown of the subject
- Who they are most suited for, and the difference between SL and HL
- What are the most important skills needed to succeed
- Do's and Don'ts for each of the exam papers
- The best Websites, YouTube Channels, Textbooks and more for the subject



and many more subjects!

1. **Speak to a Tutor:** If you are unsure if you can handle **Math AA HL** or **Physics HL**, book a single session with a Lanterna tutor to assess your current foundational skills.



What if I feel stuck?

The leap from MYP/IGCSE to the IB Diploma is the biggest academic jump you will face. Many students wait until the first round of difficult grades in IB to seek help—but the most successful students build their safety net **early**.

At Lanterna, we don't just fix problems; we prevent them. Our tutors are experts in MYP and IGCSE content, but more importantly, they serve as mentors who have walked the exact path you are about to take.

Our 500+ IB Experts include



GRADUATES

- ✓ Scored 40+ in the IB and 7s in the subjects they teach

Best for: skill-building,

- ✓ relatable mentorship, steady grade improvement

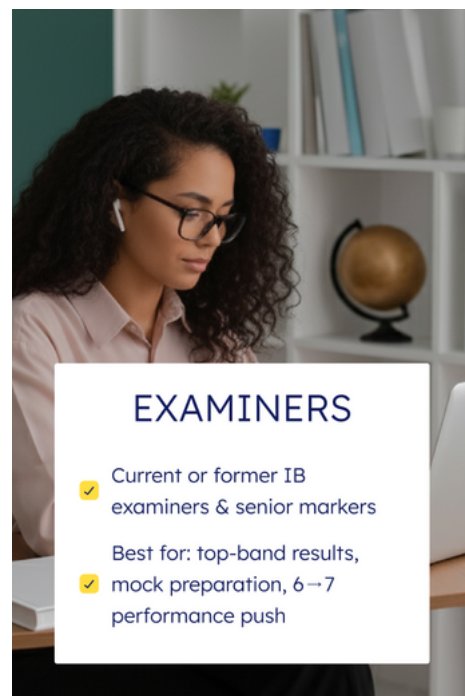


TEACHERS

- ✓ Certified educators with 10+ years' IB experience

Best for: curriculum clarity,

- ✓ concept mastery, confidence building



EXAMINERS

- ✓ Current or former IB examiners & senior markers

Best for: top-band results,

- ✓ mock preparation, 6→7 performance push

Our 500+ experts include top graduates who have stood exactly where you are standing. They remember the anxiety of choosing subjects and the excitement of starting something new. They didn't just survive the transition; they mastered it.



Who is tutoring for?

1

If you feel like you lack the guidance of are unsure

Unsure if you can handle Physics HL? Confused if Math AI or AA is better for your dream university?

Speak to a tutor who studies at your dream university and scored a 7 in those specific subjects.

2

If you are struggling with your classes

The IB Diploma assumes you have mastered the basics. If you have a "wobbly" understanding of Algebra now, Math AA HL will feel impossible later.

We provide targeted tuition for MYP and IGCSE to plug every knowledge gap before you start the Diploma.

3

If you feel like you lack motivation, or study skills needed to succeed

The IB isn't just about intelligence; it's about endurance and organization.

Our tutors coach you on time management, exam technique, and other skills that will make the next two years feel manageable while others are panic-working.

Get started with a **free consultation with one of student success experts** where they will give you genuine advice on how to best manage your journey. No strings attached



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Education