

Q. What is the difference between International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program and Advanced Placement (AP) courses?

A. Both are very rigorous courses that colleges like to see on high school transcripts. They are the most rigorous courses and are excellent preparation for college. Any student can take an AP or IB course as long as he or she has met any prerequisites for that course and feels capable of the level of academic performance required for these college-level courses. Students do not have to test into the IB Diploma Program.

The IB Diploma Program

IB classes follow a curriculum mandated by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) in Cardiff, Wales. IB courses include papers and IBO exams graded by teachers (known as internal assessments) and papers and IBO exams graded by IBO external assessors. IB final exams are given in May and are graded on a 1 to 7 scale, with 7 being the highest. Scores are reported in early July.

Students can take individual IB classes and earn a certificate of completion for each class (with a score of 4 or higher) or can be IB diploma students, which is a 2-year program for juniors and seniors. Students who decide to pursue an IB diploma must complete a specific set of courses, the Theory of Knowledge course, a 4,000 word extended essay, and 150 hours of creativity, action, and service hours.

Courses are either standard level (one year of study, followed by the IB exam) or higher level (two years of study, followed by the IB exam). IB diploma students must take at least 3 higher level courses (a student takes either a standard level or higher level course and exam, but not both). Students must earn at least 24 points (based on exam scores of 1 to 7 and the extended essay) to receive an IB diploma. Only juniors and seniors are eligible to take IB classes and exams. Only IB diploma students can take the Theory of Knowledge course.

The IB diploma program has a strong support system, with a full-time IB Coordinator helping students manage their time and necessary paperwork, arranging for special seminars, and serving as a sounding board and resource for all IB certificate and diploma students. However, the diploma program "is not for lazy people" to quote one former IB diploma student – all IB classes generally require preparation of papers, oral presentations, and written exams, all of which are either internally or externally assessed. Note also that prospective IB diploma students do need to plan ahead because there are certain courses students need to take in 9th and 10th grades to prepare for the IB diploma program in 11th and 12th grades –

The AP Program

AP courses follow a curriculum mandated by the College Board. Exams and papers during the year are prepared and graded by teachers. Registration for AP exams takes place in late winter (February-March). AP exams prepared by the College Board are given in May, and are graded by the College Board on a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 being the highest. Scores are reported in mid-July.

The AP program has several AP awards to recognize exceptional performance by AP students. These include AP Scholar (granted to students who receive grades of 3 or higher on 3 or more AP exams on full-year courses), AP Scholar with Honor (granted to students who receive an average grade of 3.25 or higher on all AP exams taken and grades of 3 or higher on 4 or more of these exams on full-year courses), and AP Scholar with Distinction (granted to students who receive an average grade of 3.5 or higher on all AP exams taken and grades of 3 or higher on 5 or more of these exams on full-year courses). Students in any grade may take AP courses (as long as any prerequisites are completed) and AP exams.

Recognition by Colleges

Colleges generally recognize AP and IB courses as being on a par, although they are generally more familiar with the AP curriculum. The extent to which colleges will give credit or placement varies among colleges, but generally if they accept AP scores (usually a score of at least 3), then they also accept IB scores (usually a score of at least 5). For example, if a college will give credit for a score of 4 on an AP exam, it will also give credit for a score of a 6 on an IB exam. Some colleges give credit for certain scores on AP or IB exams; others will allow students to place out of lower level classes, but will not give credit.

AP or IB?

Whether to take all or some AP courses, be an IB diploma student, be an IB certificate student, or take a mixture of AP and IB courses needs to be a matter of student preference, interest, and learning style. Some students who have taken both AP and IB classes feel that AP courses are geared more to learning the facts and IB courses are more geared to analyzing the facts. Students and teachers have said that IB classes cover more material, but that AP classes tend to go more in depth. Students have also said that IB classes can require more reading and writing than do AP courses.

The IB diploma program is comprehensive, but fairly inflexible. The AP program and IB certificate program are more flexible, allowing a student to take AP or IB courses in the subjects which interest them.

It is possible to take an IB course in a particular subject area and take (and do well on) the AP exam in the same subject area (IB teachers will help students decide if they should take the AP exam for a particular subject). However, students who have not taken an IB course may not take an IB exam. Review books for AP exams are commercially available; there are no commercially available IB exam review books.