

Experimental programme · supported focus

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Environmental Systems and Societies · SL

Scope and prerequisites

Supported SL focus. First assessment 2026; current SL/HL brief acquired. Remaining guide, assessment and practical requirements retain their recorded holds.

Prerequisites: read the stated quantities and units, use arithmetic and the model conditions below. Each lesson develops its own method before independent transfer.

These are original or explicitly fictional teaching examples, not actual measurements or completed assessed learner investigations.

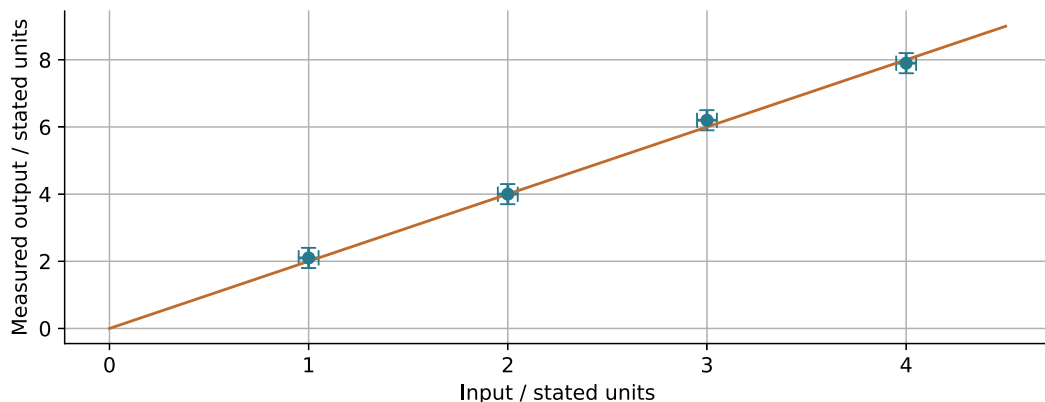
Uncertainty, gradients and model testing

■ What would explain this observation?

- A line passing near every data point is useful, but its gradient can still be uncertain. A graph is evidence for a model within the measurement range.
- Start with a prediction. State the quantities or features you would compare, then decide what evidence could distinguish two explanations.

■ Build the model

- Random variation makes repeated readings differ. **Systematic error** shifts results consistently. Absolute **uncertainty** has the measured unit; relative or percentage uncertainty compares uncertainty with the measured value.
- uncertainty: A quantified limitation on a measured result; systematic error: A consistent measurement bias.



■ Choose evidence that can test it

- For a product or quotient, adding fractional uncertainties is a common maximum-uncertainty approximation. For a difference, add absolute uncertainties. A nonzero intercept can reveal an offset or an incomplete model.
- Show units on axes and choose a sensible scale. Plot uncertainty bars where justified, draw a best-fit line rather than joining every point, and estimate steepest and shallowest plausible gradients when the course method calls for them.

■ Work from known quantities

- State the known values and their units. Choose the relation because its assumptions fit this case, then rearrange before substitution.
- Known: length = 50.0 mm with uncertainty 1.0 mm. Percentage uncertainty = $\text{absolute uncertainty} / \text{value} \times 100 = 1.0 / 50.0 \times 100 = 2.0\%$. For a quotient of two independently measured quantities with maximum percentage uncertainties 2% and 3%, the summed maximum estimate is 5%.

Example:

A 40 cm reading has an absolute uncertainty of 1 cm. Find percentage uncertainty. Use the same sequence: known quantities → model → relation → substitution → unit and interpretation.

■ Check the conclusion and its limits

- Repeating readings reduces random uncertainty in a mean but does not automatically remove a zero error. Do not quote more decimal places than your measurement can support.
- Return to the original observation. Explain what the result supports, which conditions it assumes, and one way to test a competing explanation.

Warn:

Repeating a measurement always removes a calibration offset. This claim is false: Repeating readings reduces random uncertainty in a mean but does not automatically remove a zero error. Do not quote more decimal places than your measurement can support.

Key:

Uncertainty, gradients and model testing: For a product or quotient, adding fractional uncertainties is a common maximum-uncertainty approximation. For a difference, add absolute uncertainties. A nonzero intercept can reveal an offset or an incomplete model.