Experimental programme

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

Scope and prerequisites

This handout covers selected SL topics for the course first assessed in 2026; it is not the whole syllabus.

Prerequisites: read the stated quantities and units, and use arithmetic and the model conditions below.

The examples are original and fictional: they are not real measurements or real student investigations.

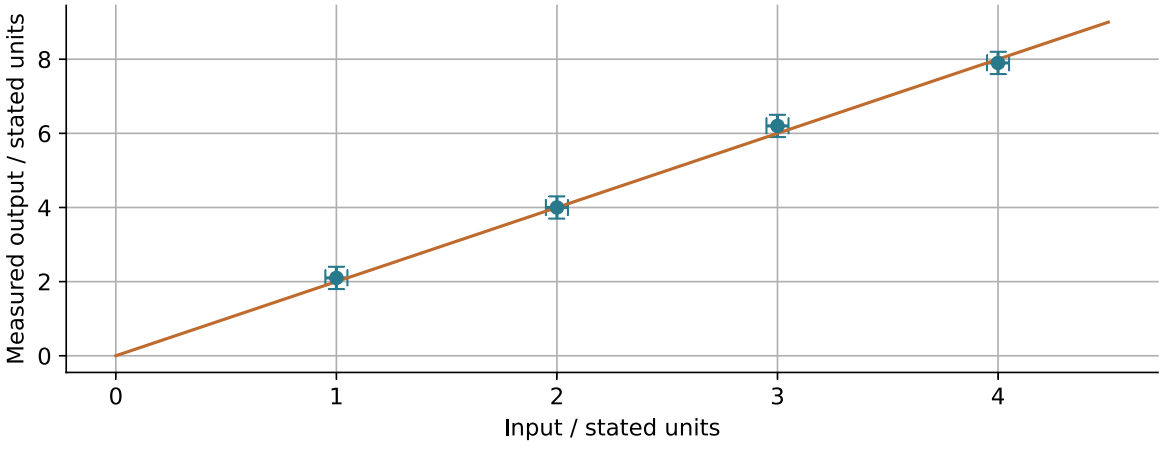
Uncertainty , gradients and model testing

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.

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.



Every point lies within its uncertainty of the line of best fit

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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.

In the lab: 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

- Known: length = 50.0 mm with uncertainty 1.0 mm.
- Percentage uncertainty = absolute uncertainty/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%.

Your turn: A 40 cm reading has an absolute uncertainty of 1 cm. Find percentage uncertainty.

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.

Not true: Repeating a measurement always removes a calibration offset. Repeating and averaging reduces RANDOM scatter in the mean. A calibration offset shifts every reading identically, so repeats land on the same wrong value; only recalibration removes it.

Key:

- Random variation makes repeated readings differ.
- For a product or quotient, adding fractional uncertainties is a common maximum-uncertainty approximation.
- Watch for: repeating readings reduces random uncertainty in a mean but does not automatically remove a zero error.

Write from a percentage uncertainty of 5 percent

- A reading is 80 cm and the absolute uncertainty is 4 cm.
- Find the percentage uncertainty. Repeating a measurement does not remove a calibration offset.