

# ACADEMIC DECATHLON



## A Contest of Academic Strength

*Providing academic program to encourage,  
acknowledge and reward academic excellence  
through teamwork among students of all  
achievement levels.*

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A Non-Profit Organization

# ESSAY READER GUIDELINES

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*Since 1968*, the Academic Decathlon has grown into the premier scholastic competition in America. The Academic Decathlon was created to provide opportunities for high school decathletes to experience the challenges of rigorous team and individual competition. Designed to provide a forum for celebrating and acknowledging scholastic achievement and academic excellence in the context of a team environment, the Academic Decathlon provides high school decathletes the opportunity to participate in an educational forum that fosters a deep respect for knowledge, cooperation, and self-esteem.

## PREFACE

The Academic Decathlon (AD) is a team competition in academics for high school students in grades nine through twelve. Academic Decathletes compete in teams of six to nine students. AD involves students of all levels of academic achievement. To ensure that the program is inclusive of students of varying ability levels, AD requires that each team include at least two “A,” or “honors” students; two “B,” or “scholastic” students; and two “C” and below, or “varsity” students.

Essay scorers’ expectations and standards of judging should be set at an appropriate level for Academic Decathlon’s participants. Scorers should be made aware that AD is not a competition that involves only honors-level or gifted students, though certainly many AD participants do excel in academics.

## ESSAY EVENT

### Essay Event

1. Students have fifty (50) minutes to pre-write, plan, organize, draft, and write a final version of their essay in response to a specific prompt.

After the allotted fifty minutes has elapsed, the essays are collected and secured by the test-room proctors and then prepared for scoring by the Essay Readers. Essay scorers should be made aware of the time that is allotted for the students to take the essay exam, so their scoring standard is set at an appropriate level, given the circumstances limiting the writing task—the standard of scoring for an essay written on demand in fifty minutes is clearly different than that for a paper written over the course of several days.

2. Students will respond to one of three essay prompts. Either two prompts will focus on the Super Quiz topic (Social Science or Science) and one will focus on the selected literature, or two prompts will focus on the selected literature and one will focus on the Super Quiz.
3. The prompts will require students to write an expository essay, i.e., an essay that exposes information by explaining, defining, or interpreting the given subject. Prompts may also solicit an argumentative, or persuasive, essay, i.e., an essay that seeks to convince the reader of the truth or falseness of an idea.

### Essay Prompts

At competition, students will be given three essay prompts from which to choose. Prompts used at competition require students to write an expository essay. The topical breakdown of the prompts will focus on the Super Quiz topic (Social Science or Science) and on the selected literature.

An expository essay is an effort to inform or explain. Its essential quality is clarity. The writer of an expository essay takes a subject and opens it up to the reader. To accomplish this feat, a writer does not strive to argue or persuade but to convey significant information clearly and accurately. Exposition writing requires identifying an audience, explaining the purpose in a thesis, presenting adequate content information which supports the thesis, and organizing the subject into logically ordered divisions while establishing a lively voice that uses appropriate vocabulary and tone, and demonstrates control of the conventions of Standard English mechanics, usage, and spelling through varied and sophisticated sentence structure.

To focus the expository essay, the writer must establish a point of departure by introducing the subject and by providing sufficient background information so that the reader can follow the explanation. The writer's task is to increase the reader's knowledge of the subject, to assist the reader in understanding a procedure or process, and/or to provide the reader with an enhanced comprehension of an idea or concept. Expository writers present their information as objectively as possible.

When judging an essay, scorers should consider whether the mode of discourse used by the writer is effective and appropriate for the given prompt. For example, a personal narrative may not be an effective means for a student to respond to a prompt that asks students to compare and contrast two strategies for addressing the global energy crisis.

Essay scorers will be provided information to review in order to become familiar with the prompts used in competition. The scorers will focus on correctness and how effectively and logically the information is presented. It is also important for scorers to check the accuracy of all the information presented in the students' essays.

## **SCORING METHOD**

When assessing student essays, it is essential to use a method of scoring that adheres to a specific rubric, uses defined elements or characteristics of writing, and maintains a consistent process. A scoring rubric is a tool that is used to identify the criteria and proficiency indicators on which an essay will be scored. Developing a predetermined scheme for the evaluation process reduces the subjectivity involved in evaluating an essay.

Writing assessments are generally either analytic or holistic. Analytic scoring is a method of scoring that evaluates the different dimensions of writing separately. For example, an analytic rubric might require the essay reader to provide separate scores for mechanics, organization and development, clarity of ideas, and scope. Holistic scoring involves the assignment of a single score to an essay on the basis of the reader's overall impression of the essay. Both methods of scoring essays—analytic and holistic—are valid in a large-scale assessment.

### **The Essay Scoring Rubric**

CAD uses a modified analytic scoring rubric to assess the essay component of its competition. (See HANDOUT# 1: ESSAY RUBRIC) The essay rubric is analytic insofar as it requires the reader to provide two separate scores for the essay. One score evaluates the focus, scope, organization, content, and development of the essay. The second score evaluates the language, style, and conventions of the essay. The first score accounts for 80 percent of the student's final essay score, and the second score accounts for 20 percent of the student's final essay score.

This analytic approach is, however, "modified" in that not every dimension of the writing task is scored separately; instead, multiple dimensions of the writing task are evaluated within each of the two scores. The modified analytic scoring rubric is a meaningful and reliable way for scorers to assess students' essays.

### **Explanation of the Essay Rubric Domains**

Following are brief explanations of each of the domains of the Essay rubric. To ensure fair and consistent scoring, it is essential that all essay scorers read and understand these domain descriptions.

**Focus/Scope:** This domain assesses how thoroughly the student addresses the given prompt and how successful he/she is in establishing a clear thesis or purpose. The student should make a specific point about a specific topic and should maintain this focus throughout his/her essay. This domain also calls for judgment on the student's range of understanding of the given topic.

**Organization:** This domain assesses the manner in which the student presents his/her ideas to the reader. This domain calls for judgment on the clarity, logic, and sequence of the ideas presented and the degree to which these ideas are developed and sustained within and across paragraphs using transitional devices. This domain also assesses the quality of the student's introduction and conclusion and the effectiveness of these paragraphs in presenting and reinforcing the student's main point(s).

**Content/Development:** This domain assesses the quality of the student's ideas and the degree to which they are fully developed through facts, examples, anecdotes, details, opinions, statistics, reasons, and/or explanations. The reader will also assess the relevancy of the information presented to the overall focus of the essay.

**Language/Style:** This domain assesses the effectiveness and appropriateness of the student's choice, use, and arrangement of words and sentence structures. The student's use of language should serve to create an effective and appropriate tone and a consistent and powerful voice. The student should use language to communicate his/her ideas clearly and effectively. The reader will need to consider the student's choice of words, range and specificity of vocabulary, as well as sentence variety.

**Conventions:** This domain assesses the correctness of the student's grammar, mechanics (spelling, capitalization and punctuation), usage, and sentence formations.

### **ORGANIZING THE ESSAY SCORING SESSION**

The training of the essay scorers is scheduled immediately prior to the actual essay scoring session. That way, the information that is covered in the training will be fresh in the scorers' minds as they score the essays. The essay scoring session takes place in a quiet room with plenty of chairs and table space.

Each scorer will receive a copy of the essay prompts during the training and will review them as a group to be sure that everyone fully understands them.

It is essential for scorers to follow the lead of the Essay Coordinator and the system that is established for handling the essays, so that no essays are misplaced. Under no circumstances should essays be taken out of the scoring room (unless they have been appointed to a courier to be delivered to the scoring room).

**Training.**

To ensure consistent scoring, it is essential that all essay scorers participate in a thorough training session. Even seasoned essay scorers should attend the training session, as their experience and expertise will be an asset to your training, and they will be a welcome resource on which less experienced scorers may draw.

At the beginning of the training, scorers will be acquainted with some general points of student participation and the general points of the essay competition.

**Participants**

1. The Academic Decathlon (AD) is a team competition in academics for high school students in grades nine through twelve.
2. Academic Decathletes compete in teams of six to nine students. AD requires that each team include at least two “A,” or “honors” students; two “B,” or “scholastic” students; and two “C” and below, or “varsity students.
3. Students compete within their GPA category—separate awards are given within each of the three GPA categories (honors, scholastic, and varsity). However, all essays—regardless of the students’ GPA categories—should be scored according to the same standard.

**Scoring Procedure.**

1. Each essay will be read independently by two scorers, and the average of these two scores will be the student’s final essay score.
2. Scorers should score each essay independently, should refrain from looking at one another’s scores, and should not discuss their scores.
3. All scorers must score each essay in accordance with the assigned rubric.
4. If the scores given by the two scorers differ by 200 or more points, then the essay will be read by a third scorer. The final score of the essay will be the average of the two **closest** scores. The Essay Coordinator will review the scores to determine which essays require a third read. Scorers do not need to compare their score with that of the previous reader.
5. Each essay will have two Scantron forms (one form per scorer) attached to it. Before entering his/her scores on the Scantron, the scorer should check that the student ID number on the Scantron is the same as that on the student’s essay cover page.
6. The scorer will mark two scores on each Scantron sheet. One score indicates the scorer’s rating for Table A of the rubric, which assesses focus/scope, organization, and content/development. The other score indicates the scorer’s rating for Table B, which assesses language/style and conventions. (Scorers are not responsible for calculating the sum of these two scores.)

7. If the essay does not address the given prompt, the scorer must consult with a second scorer. If the second scorer agrees that the essay is off-prompt, then both scorers must mark the “Off Prompt” box on their respective Scantron forms. No score should be indicated in Tables A or B, as all off-prompt essays should receive a zero score. If the two scorers do not agree on whether the essay is off-prompt, then a third scorer must read the essay. The scores of the two readers who are in agreement will be considered the final scores for that essay.
8. If the essay is illegible, insufficient, or a blank paper, the scorer must consult with a second scorer. If the second scorer agrees that the essay is illegible or insufficient, then the scorers must mark the “Nonscorable” box on their respective Scantron forms. In such cases, no score should be indicated in Tables A or B, as all illegible, insufficient, or blank essays receive a zero score. If the two scorers do not agree on whether the essay is illegible or insufficient, then a third scorer must read the essay. The scores of the two readers who are in agreement will be considered the final scores for that essay.

### **Essay Rubric.**

It is very important to review and understand the Essay Rubric and its domains as it helps to ensure that all essays will be judged according to the same standard. It is essential that all scorers score according to the given rubric even though it may differ from a personal grading philosophy.

1. **Reader Bias.** Scorers may have potential biases which could cause unfair scoring of an essay. Scorers need to be conscious of their biases – be they political, cultural, racial, religious, etc. - when reading essays and avoid letting such biases cloud your judgment of an essay. If a scorer feels that he/she will not be able to provide an unbiased assessment of a particular essay, then he/she should not score that essay and should simply pass it on to another reader.

Scorers should also avoid handwriting biases. A student’s handwriting, unless it’s illegible, should not impact the score of the essay. If a student’s handwriting is annoying or distracting to a scorer (but still legible), then do not score the essay and pass it on to another reader.

2. **Simulated Scoring Exercise.** Scorers will participate in an Essay Training Session to calibrate scoring. This exercise allows scorers to practice using the given rubric in a hands-on situation. During this exercise variances among essay scores will be discussed, as such discussions will often highlight important aspects of the scoring process and will lead scorers toward a shared standard for scoring. It is important that all scorers actively participate in this process.
3. **Available Resources.** The essential resources and items will be made available to the scorers in the essay scoring room.

There will be two Scantron forms included with each essay. If an essay is missing one or both Scantron forms. Additional Scantron forms will be used for any third reads that are required by a variance in score of 200 points or greater. Scorers will need to fill in the Scantron (using a No. 2 pencil) to mark the student’s ID number on the form.

At this point, essay scorers will be ready to begin scoring the essays. The Essay Coordinator will remain on hand in the essay scoring room to answer any questions, and to check all essays that have been read by two scorers to ascertain whether or not they will require a third read.

# HANDOUT #1: SAMPLE ESSAY EVALUATION SCANTRON FORM



## U.S. Academic Decathlon

### Essay Evaluation Form

STUDENT I.D. NUMBER			
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**IMPORTANT**

USE NO. 2 PENCIL ONLY

BLUE OR BLACK INK PEN

**Directions:** Select one performance category in Table A. Within the range of points for that category, record the points scored in the space provided.

**A. Focus/Scope - Organization - Content/Development [80 % of the score]**

Addresses the prompt in an outstanding manner; responds to all aspects of the task; is organized clearly and consistently based on a strong central purpose; provides substantial and specific evidence to support major positions	<b>OUTSTANDING</b> 85 - 100 pts
Addresses the prompt in an effective manner; responds to several aspects of the task; is organized effectively based on a clear central purpose; provides appropriate evidence to support positions	<b>EXCELLENT</b> 70 - 84 pts
Addresses the prompt in an adequate manner; focuses on a minor aspect of the task; is organized based on a restatement of the prompt; provides some predictable evidence to support positions	<b>GOOD</b> 55 - 69 pts
Addresses the prompt in a basic manner; is organized in a limited way; provides evidence that is general or not clearly linked to a position	<b>FAIR</b> 40 - 54 pts
Addresses the prompt in a limited manner; is organized in a confused way; provides superficial evidence with inadequate elaboration	<b>WEAK</b> 15 - 39 pts
Fails to address the prompt; absence of organization; absence of relevant content	<b>POOR</b> 0 - 14 pts

TOTAL FOR A		
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**Total for A**

**Directions:** Select one performance category in Table B. Within the range of points for that category, record the points scored in the space provided.

**B. Language/Style - Conventions [20 % of the score]**

Demonstrates exceptional control of sentence structure and precise word choice; is almost entirely free of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics	<b>OUTSTANDING</b> 85 - 100 pts
Demonstrates strong control of sentence structure and appropriate word choice; is generally free of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics	<b>EXCELLENT</b> 70 - 84 pts
Demonstrates reasonable control of sentence structure and some precision in word choice; contains confusing errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics	<b>GOOD</b> 55 - 69 pts
Demonstrates some lack of control of sentence structure; limited in word choice; minimal control of grammar, usage, and mechanics	<b>FAIR</b> 40 - 54 pts
Demonstrates some lack of control of sentence structure; minimal variety in word choice; minimal control of grammar, usage, and mechanics	<b>WEAK</b> 15 - 39 pts
Minimal control of sentence structure; inappropriate word choice; contains serious errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics	<b>POOR</b> 0 - 14 pts

TOTAL FOR B		
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**Total for B**

**Off Prompt (OP)**  = Zero Score  
Prompt is not addressed

**Nonscorable (NS)**  = Zero Score  
Essay is: illegible, insufficient, a blank paper

**HANDOUT #2: SAMPLE ESSAY EVALUATION SCANTRON FORM**

Print First Name: _____
Decathlete ID Number: _____
Prompt Number: _____

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# ACADEMIC DECATHLON

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# ESSAY WRITING TEST

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**REMINDER**

Make sure the “prompt number” you select and your I.D. number are written on the upper right-hand corner of **all** your pages, including this page.

**ESSAY PROMPTS**

- In *The Good Earth*, Wang Lung is proud of his children, although he does not always understand them clearly.

In a well-organized essay, select two or three of Wang Lung’s children, describe his misunderstandings of them, and how these misunderstandings are resolved or remain unresolved.
- Wang Xiaoni represents a new generation of Chinese writers living under very different circumstances from their predecessors.*

In a well-organized essay, discuss the extent to which her poems reflect earlier Chinese elements and to what extent they have been influenced by the West.
- In many developed nations, perhaps the greatest effect of climate change over the next century will be the especially adverse impact on nature. In a well-organized essay, support this assertion using evidence in the *USAD Super Quiz Resource Guide*.