

Analysis of the Scoring Form Components

Components 1-7 of the Scoring Form address the content/development of the essay

Point value	Component with description
0-4	Introduction / Thesis <input type="checkbox"/> Original, insightful, and/or interesting <input type="checkbox"/> Not merely restating the prompt
0-4	Response To Prompt* <input type="checkbox"/> Conveys understanding of the prompt and tasks <input type="checkbox"/> Clearly addresses all aspects of prompt
0-4	Evidence* <input type="checkbox"/> Specific and accurate examples <input type="checkbox"/> Evidence supports thesis and main ideas
0-4	Analysis / Commentary <input type="checkbox"/> Ideas explained thoroughly <input type="checkbox"/> Points argued effectively
0-4	Cohesion <input type="checkbox"/> Articulate and clearly focused <input type="checkbox"/> Assertions equivalently developed
0-4	Organization <input type="checkbox"/> Paragraphs have topic sentences <input type="checkbox"/> Transitions are thoughtful
0-4	Closing <input type="checkbox"/> Intentional finish <input type="checkbox"/> Not repetitive or merely summarizing

* USAD publishes essay scoring guidelines for essay readers/judges, which include details student writers may include in response to each prompt

Components 8-10 of the Scoring Form address writing skills applied to the essay

Points avail.	Component with description
1-4	Word Choice / Diction / Voice <input type="checkbox"/> Diction appropriate to topic <input type="checkbox"/> Student writer knows/owns the words used
1-4	Spelling / Punctuation <input type="checkbox"/> Accurate spelling <input type="checkbox"/> Proper punctuation
1-4	Grammar / Sentence Structure <input type="checkbox"/> Subject/verb agreement <input type="checkbox"/> Varied sentence structure

Further details about scoring form:

- Some components have a scale of 0-4 and others 1-4. This is intentional. A writer could receive a “zero” for Introduction/Thesis, for instance, for having no visible or articulated introduction and/or thesis, but a writer could not receive a “zero” for “Spelling/Punctuation,” as at least some of the words must be spelled correctly and some appropriate punctuation used, warranting a “one” to be the lowest possible score in that category.

- Consider these point descriptors:

4 = excellent, superior	2 = attempted, fair	0 = insufficient
3 = acceptable, effective	1 = barely, minimal	
- Essay judges are directed to give a clear and complete “zero” score to any essay that is “off prompt” or “non-scoreable.”
 - An “off-prompt” essay does not respond to the prompt selected.
 - A “non-scoreable” essay is either insufficient or illegible (typically true only of handwritten essays) or too brief.

Discussion of the ten scoring components for students:

Introduction/Thesis – Most writers know that a good introduction is necessary for a great essay. The introduction creates for the reader the important first impression of its author and what to expect of the essay that follows. Whatever you decide to do at the start of your essay to engage your audience right away—create an insightful comparison, highlight interesting details, ask a question, or something else—do not merely parrot the prompt. Be original. And also be certain that your essay includes, and very near its start, a clear thesis in which you state your essay’s primary assertion, the essence of your essay’s primary point and purpose, what you will “prove” with the rest of your essay.

Response to Prompt – It is very important that you respond specifically and completely to the prompt. One of the biggest challenges students encounter with essay writing deals with response to the prompt. Be certain, first, that you completely understand what the prompt is asking you to do, and second, that you completely answer the question(s) asked by the prompt. This may sound ridiculous, but without first reading the prompt very carefully and looking for keywords, there is great risk in writing an essay that does not meet the requirements of the prompt.

Evidence – Providing evidence is your opportunity to show how well you have prepared for the competition by reading and studying the USAD materials. Develop the assertions that support your thesis by providing specific examples—evidence from the U.S. Academic Decathlon resource guides or the literary work—as the prompt directs. Your essay’s readers/judges will know which details to expect you to include, and your essay will score very low in this component if you either do not include evidence or include evidence that is either not supported by or contradictory to the USAD resources. Seize this opportunity to synthesize what you have learned from your studies into your own written ideas; transfer that understanding into your confident voice in the essay.

Analysis/Commentary – For each piece of evidence you use to support your main ideas, you will need to analyze and then explain and provide commentary on how it provides support for your thoughtful response. This typically takes two to three sentences per idea, following and supporting a topic sentence; it should not merely state the evidence but provide support for why and how this evidence is the most valuable to include in your essay.

Cohesion – Cohesion is the flow of the essay or how the words, sentences, and paragraphs—as well as the individual ideas—“cohere” or fit and stick together. Consider the shift from one sentence to the next and the transitional words used between paragraphs. (There are examples of transitional words and phrases for improving cohesion toward the end of this guide.) Purposefully construct each of your assertions—each one related to and developing your thesis—to be equivalently and valuably developed.

Organization – Every essay you write should be constructed in a manner that aids its reader in following your thinking. The best essays proceed logically, are organized into paragraphs, and include transitions that also provide a sensible chronology for the essay as a response to the prompt or task. It makes great sense for each body paragraph’s topic sentence to be an assertion that “proves” as well as supports the essay’s thesis. (There are some resources in the appendix section of this resource guide to help you improve your organization. Also, in the next section of this guide, we will explore structure and how to develop an outline. These activities will help you stay organized as you write.)

Closing – Consider the closing paragraph your last chance to make a favorable impression on the reader. Do not simply summarize what you have already written. Consider how you can leave the reader pondering an aspect of the essay that was not absolutely resolved, questioning something that could be an inference from something in the essay, or feeling the need to look into the topic further. Whatever you do, bring your essay to an intentional finish with your closing statements.

Word Choice/Diction/Voice – Selecting your words carefully and using a vocabulary most appropriate for the subject is a skill used by proficient writers. Get to know the vocabulary for the content you are studying. It can be difficult to use the “right” or “best” words for a particular discussion if those words are not your own and your use of them “clunky” at best. However, word choice is a very important aspect of your voice in writing and how confidently you “speak” about any subject. (There is an activity coming up to help you build your personal vocabulary.)

Spelling/Punctuation – While we know this particular type of essay—especially due to its being timed—can feel more like a “rough” than “final” draft, it still needs to be your “best” draft, and the spelling and punctuation errors should not distract the reader from the details of the essay. The best advice is this: leave yourself at least a few minutes to review what you have written. You will be surprised what mistakes may be caught and fixed when you reread your own work.

Grammar/Sentence Structure – This category examines how well you put your sentences together and that you have mastered subject/verb agreement. It improves your essay to understand how to and then vary sentence structure to aid your argument, at times building your point through an intricate weaving of ideas, and at other times poetically dropping the mic with a very simple statement. In other words, this is where your essay can lose points if something in your writing does not follow the accepted rules of English or you submit a very choppy essay full, solely, of simple sentences.