

Massachusetts Academic Decathlon

Coaches' Handbook

2019-20





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Our History

The brainchild of Dr. Robert Peterson—World War II B-17 pilot and later superintendent of schools in Orange County, California—the very first Academic Decathlon competition was held in 1968 as a means of recognizing academic excellence and achievement that matched the rigor and intensity as well as the team environment of high school athletics. By 1982, the program had spread from California to sixteen more states, all of which competed at the very first National Finals held that year at Loyola Marymount University. In the three and a half decades since, the competition has been tweaked and updated to reflect and prepare students for our rapidly changing society, but Academic Decathlon has inspired and continues to inspire hundreds of thousands of students across the United States to pursue a lifelong commitment to exploration, leadership, and community.

Lifetime educator Henry Lukas initiated the long and storied history of Massachusetts Academic Decathlon in the 1983 season, and the state program hasn't looked back since. From our first state champion, Newton North High School, placing 5th across the nation in 1985, to the continued dominance of Acton-Boxborough Regional High School with 15 top-10 finishes at Nationals in the 21st century alone, Massachusetts schools have achieved tremendous success at the regional, state, and national levels.

Below you'll find a list of Massachusetts State Champions dating back to 1985. (Cambridge Rindge & Latin was selected to represent the state at Nationals in the 1983 and 1984 seasons.) For the latest complete competition results, visit the Results page on our website. You can find more competition records from across the world at the crowd-sourced Academic Decathlon Scores and Information Center.

School	Number of Titles	Years Won
Acton-Boxborough Regional	27	1992-1999, 2001-2019
Framingham North	2	1990, 1991
Wayland	2	1987, 1989
Newton North	2	1985, 1986
Weymouth	1	2000
Franklin	1	1988

STATE DIRECTORS

State Director	Years
Henry Lukas	1982-2008
Mike Tempesta	2008-2010
Paul Thorp	2010-2014
Steven Noble	2014-2015
Sebastian Garza	2015-



The Competition

Academic Decathlon is a 10-event high school academic competition with several unique factors that set it apart from "similar" competitions.

Firstly, rather than focus on one narrow discipline, Academic Decathlon follows in the footsteps of the track-and-field decathlon by focusing on ten of them, challenging students and coaches alike, bringing out their best, and impacting every aspect of their lives beyond the classroom. With the firm belief that synthesis between fields is a necessity for success, we promote mastering 10 different disciplines, not just specializing in one, and learning new skills—public speaking, differential calculus, music theory—that may have previously been terrifying.

Perhaps even more uniquely, however, the competition is not just meant for already-high-achieving students. Academic Decathlon is the only high school academic competition that necessitates students of differing GPA ranges in order to field a full team: the "A"-average students, or Honors, have GPA's of 3.75 and above; the "B"-average students, or Scholastics, have GPA's between 3.0 and 3.75; and the "C"-average students, or Varsities, have GPA's below 3.0. (The standards for GPA calculation, which are specific to Academic Decathlon and may differ from official school GPA, are covered later in this handbook.)

These GPA divisions, or "brackets", are such an integral part of Academic Decathlon because they encourage coaches to find and shepherd oft-overlooked and underperforming students into the program, where they so often find a friend group that feels like a family, the motivation to work harder, and a love and passion for learning. It's not uncommon to hear stories, often from the students themselves, of how Academic Decathlon and a dedicated coach stopped a student from dropping out, steered them toward sobriety, or put them on a path toward college.

The ten events of Academic Decathlon are as follows:

- The 7 testing events (the "objectives"):
 - Math
 - Music
 - Economics
 - Science
 - Literature
 - Art
 - Social Science
- The 3 performance events (the "subjectives" or "subs"):
 - Essay
 - Speech
 - Interview

Tip: On Massachusetts competition days, the tests always take place in this order. (Other states, as well as the Nationals competitions, use different orders.)

The Objectives

The 7 objective events are all written tests that students are allotted 30 minutes to complete. All tests have 50 questions, with the exception of Math, which has 35.

The objective events (with the exception of Math) all revolve around a common theme and curriculum that varies from year to year. Sometimes it is a specific region of the world (such as 2013's Russia or 2016's India); sometimes it is a specific time period (such as 2014's World War I or 2019's the 1960s); and sometimes it is something more conceptual (like 2015's Energy and Innovation or 2020's Illness and Wellness). The central organization, United States Academic Decathlon (or USAD), issues Resource Guides each season that, paired with the year's selected works, are the sole source of material that will be tested on at competitions. While Resource Guides must be purchased each year (usually for \$700), they are an absolute necessity to compete.

The new theme is announced each year on March 1. Outlines are posted on USAD's website on May 1, and the guides become available for download on May 15.

The Music test will begin with a 12-question listening portion based on the year's listening selections. If the venue at States allows for it, the Art test may have a similar 12-question viewing portion projected onto one or more screens, though usually this is not the case. If so, the coaches will be informed ahead of time.

Students are expected to bring their own No. 2 pencils.

The Subjectives

There are three performance, or "subjective", events at full competitions. While the Round 1 competition in November of each year does not include these events—only the 7 objective events—the Regionals, States and Nationals competitions do, and they are an integral part of Academic Decathlon. Students regularly cite the Speech and Interview events as the areas in which they experienced the most growth, and neither they nor Essay should be overlooked during practices.

Some of the best ways to practice Speech and Interview are to have students perform their prepared speeches to others (and to themselves at home) on a regular basis, and to practice impromptu speeches and interview answers as a class. Even though the subjectives aren't included during the Round 1 competition, that doesn't mean November is too early to start practicing!

Additionally, after the Regionals and States rounds, your team will receive an individualized breakdown of how each student was scored in each subjective event in order to help growth.

It is strongly recommended that students dress in formal business attire for the Speech and Interview events.



ESSAY

The Essay event is conducted before competitions over a two-day window, generally the Thursday and Friday a full week before the Regionals competitions and two full weeks before the States competitions. This week-long period between the essay writing and actual competition allows the judges ample time to score the essays and ensure fair grading. A team must find a 60-minute window during these two days for **the entire team** to gather in a computer lab (or other location with computers available) and complete their essays. If any student is unable to make it when the rest of their team competes, they forfeit the event and receive a score of 0.

The essay writing itself takes place online at essay.massdecathlon.org over a 50-minute interval. (It is suggested that you set aside 60 minutes or more in order to provide time to read instructions and ensure everyone is properly logged in.) The instructions for the online platform are in a separate document and will be emailed to coaches beforehand, but sample instructions can be found on the Coaches' Corner.

During the Essay event, students will be shown three prompts from three different (non-Math) objective topics. Each student will receive the same three prompts. As an example, the students may be asked to either explain a scientific concept (Science), compare and contrast two artists' work (Art), or give an in-depth analysis of a work on literature (Literature). They must choose one prompt and proceed to write a well-structured essay that demonstrates a solid understanding of the concepts in question and which thoroughly addresses the prompt. The judges will then score the essays based on the official USAD Essay rubric (which can be found on the Coaches' Corner).

The essay will automatically save periodically, but for some schools, the website will give a strange glitch: the check marks on the proctor's screen may flicker, and the students' timers may freeze or otherwise behave strangely. Often, for a student affected by the glitch, the timer will continue ticking upward even after the 50-minute time allotment has elapsed. We are continuing to work on fixing this glitch, but **if any of your students' computers displays this behavior, have all of your students copy and paste their final essays into a text document and immediately email them to you.** You should then contact the State Director and forward them the essays immediately.

SPEECH

The Speech event actually consists of two separate speeches: a 4-minute prepared speech and a 2-minute impromptu speech.

Upon entering the speech room, the student will be instructed to begin their prepared speech whenever they are ready. The prepared speech **must be between 3:30 and 4:00 minutes in length**, and may be on any topic—it does *not* have to be relevant to the year's theme. Keep in mind, however, that reading from or otherwise **using note cards during the speech is forbidden**, as are using any props or singing/rapping for a significant portion of the speech. The speech must also be completely the student's own original work (excepting any quotes), and any plagiarism will earn a student a score of 0.

The time during the speech will be signaled by one of the judges at three intervals: with one minute remaining before the four-minute mark, the timer will hold up a card that says "1" on it. With thirty seconds remaining, the timer will hold up a card that says "½" on it. At the four-minute mark, if the student is still speaking, the timer will hold up a card that says "0" on it. Upon seeing the 0 card, the student must stop immediately. Continuing to speak after the 0 card (the 4:00 mark), or ending the speech before the ½ card (the 3:30 mark),



will result in a 70-point time penalty. (The 1 card, at the 3:00 mark, is simply a warning, and does not signal that the student should stop yet.)

Following the prepared speech, the student will be directed to a table with three impromptu speech topics listed. The student will then have one minute to choose a prompt and brainstorm with the provided notecard and pencil. Following the preparation period, the student must then deliver a speech that **must be between 1:30 and 2:00 minutes in length**. As with the prepared speech, the use of a note card *during* the speech, as well as any props, excessive singing/rapping, or plagiarism, are strictly prohibited.

The timing of the impromptu speech works just like the prepared speech, just two minutes shorter: the student must end their speech between the ½ and 0 card (1:30 to 2:00 minutes) or earn a time penalty, this time for 30 points.

The judges, who score the speeches on an online platform, use the official USAD Speech rubric that can be found on the Coaches' Corner.

INTERVIEW

The Interview event consists of a 7-minute semiformal interview with a panel of two to three judges who will take turns asking a set of predetermined questions (provided by USAD) to the student.

The judges will always begin with "Tell me a little bit about yourself" and, as the seven-minute mark approaches, end with "Is there anything else you'd like us to know about you?"

Though some other states use resumes for the Interview event, they are not used in Massachusetts and may not be brought into the interview room.

The judges, who score the speeches on an online platform, use the official USAD Interview rubric that can be found on the Coaches' Corner.

Super Quiz

In addition to the ten individual events, the Regionals and States competitions would not be complete without the Super Quiz event, a tradition that has been around since the inception of Academic Decathlon.

The Super Quiz event consists of 3 rounds of 12 questions each. For the Regionals and States competitions, the first round will consist of each team's Varsity students; the second, the Scholastics; and the third, the Honors. The three students per round (or fewer, if a team does not have a full nine) will go up to the designated area and sit down together with a proctor. As the questions are shown on the screen, the three students on each team will have 12 seconds to quietly discuss each question and agree on only a single answer, which will then be marked on your team's answer sheet. The time will start once the emcee finishes reading each question. Each question must be answered within the given time frame: when time is called, the students must raise their pens or pencils immediately. (Waving their pencils excitedly upon getting a question right is heavily encouraged!)



As there is only one answer sheet per team, each of the three GPA brackets on your team should designate a single student to answer the questions before the Super Quiz begins. (In essence, one Varsity, one Scholastic, and one Honors.)

Team scores are calculated based on the raw number of questions (out of 36) answered correctly. The top three teams (overall at Regionals and per school size division at States) will be recognized at Awards, though only the top team (overall at Regionals and per school size division at States) will receive a trophy.

Super Quiz results have no impact on overall team scores or rankings.

Things are a little different in November. Since you are permitted to bring as many students as want to compete, it wouldn't make much sense to keep everyone divided by teams. Because of this, we 'scramble' the students around with students from other teams and GPA brackets, such that we have more 'full' teams and students are able to meet competitors from other schools. Students will receive their team and round assignment on their nametags upon arriving to the competition. Since most of these students will not know any of their companions beforehand, each student will have their own answer sheet on the table at the November competition. Team scores will be tallied from the top two students per round, and the winning team will be announced at awards, but no trophy will be awarded.



The Team

The heart and soul of Academic Decathlon is the team—your students and the bond they will form throughout the competition season!

Rosters

While you may bring an unlimited number of students to officially compete at November's Round 1 competition, the roster must be narrowed down for the Regionals and States competitions. The roster is usually due the Friday two weeks before the Regionals competitions, but be sure to check the season's registration schedule for the official deadlines.

When submitting the official roster form for Regionals, there are three types of students you'll be listing:

- A maximum of three students may be selected per GPA bracket for a total of up to nine.
- Additionally, up to three more students may be chosen as "designated alternates".
- As many more students as you wish may be listed as simply alternates.

On competition days, only the students on the "official" or "main" team of nine may compete in all ten events. Only these students may count toward the team score and, at States, qualify for Nationals. All other students are allowed to participate as "alternates", but they do not complete the Speech and Interview portions and are not eligible for awards.

You are free to move around students (i.e. to switch an alternate with a member of the official competing team) so long as the alternate in question has all paperwork (signed permission form, GPA worksheet, and transcript) submitted **by the original deadline** (thus being "cleared" to compete). To change your roster, simply email whoever is in charge of the rosters that season, or, if you wish to make a change on competition day, email Sebastian.

Additionally, the aforementioned designated alternates (of which you may select up to three, of any GPA bracket) are eligible to compete in the Essay event held online a week or two before the competition. This is intended to provide some flexibility for your team, since substituting an alternate who did not take Essay in the place of a student who did would put that alternate at a disadvantage for not having completed one of the ten events. As such, it is recommended that you list your strongest alternates as the designated alternates, in case you do end up needing to substitute one for a member of the official team.

For States, it will be assumed that your roster will remain the same as it was at Regionals unless you notify Massachusetts Academic Decathlon otherwise.

It should also be noted that, due to printing costs, a fee of \$50 will be charged to teams who bring more than three alternates to Regionals and States each. (Thus, if you bring four alternates to both Regionals and States, you will be charged a total of \$100 in alternates fees.) You may find these invoices on our website at the Coaches' Corner.



GPA Calculation

Academic Decathlon would not be half as effective as it is without its system of GPA divisions. Each team must be composed of a combination of GPA brackets, with a full team consisting of three Honors, Scholastics, and Varsities each. A closer look at the breakdown of these GPA divisions is as follows:

- **Honors:** 3.75-4.00 GPA
- **Scholastic:** 3.00-3.749 GPA
- **Varsity:** 0.00-2.99 GPA

A student's GPA bracket is determined not by their official school GPA but rather by a specifically calculated GPA for Academic Decathlon. This GPA only takes into account the previous two years of a student's education (with the exception of freshmen, for whom only 8th grade is counted) and is never impacted by the current academic year.

Additionally, only academic classes are counted, meaning that subjects like PE, art, music performance, and more are not taken into account when determining a student's Academic Decathlon GPA. This generally means that a student's Acadec GPA is lower than their official school GPA. For a full list of acceptable and unacceptable courses, please see the official USAD list on our website at the Coaches' Corner. If you are still unsure whether to count a class, email Sebastian.

An A in a class, as determined by the school's guidelines, counts as a 4.0 regardless of its status as an AP or CP course; likewise, a B counts as a 3.0, a C counts as a 2.0, a D counts as a 1.0, and an F counts as a 0.0.

As you might notice looking back at the GPA division cutoffs, despite the fact that these brackets are often referred to as "A", "B" and "C" students, a student may qualify as a Varsity while having gotten straight B's and a single C—and perhaps even multiple A's in classes such as PE, art, and band. As such, there are likely many more Varsities in your school than you might think!

When submitting your paperwork for the season, one such document that you will need for each student is a GPA worksheet (as well as a transcript to verify their grades). This GPA worksheet, as well as a step-by-step guide on how to use it, can be found on our website at the Coaches' Corner. As the coach, it is *your* responsibility to correctly calculate each student's GPA division before submitting your rosters. Each student's placement will be checked thoroughly.

In certain situations, a team's coach may wish to "play up" a student—for instance, to field a Varsity student as a Scholastic, or a Scholastic as an Honors. This is completely acceptable.

If a student has recently transferred schools or come from an alternative education program, they may not have transcripts available. If this is the case, the student must compete as an Honors.



Scoring

Each of the ten events in the Academic Decathlon is worth a total of 1000 points per student. For most of the objective events (all but Math), this means that each of the 50 multiple-choice questions on the test is worth 20 points. For Math, which has 35 questions, each is worth 28.5714 points (though all Academic Decathlon scores get rounded to one decimal point). Essay, Speech and Interview are all evaluated by volunteer judges as per the official United States Academic Decathlon rubrics, and the judges' scores for each event are averaged to yield a final event score for a student.

As each student competes in a total of ten events, final individual scores are out of a total of 10,000 points.

A team score consists of the top two **overall** individual scores per GPA bracket, meaning that a team score is out of a total of 60,000 points. As such, a school may theoretically field a very competitive team with only six members, though having only one—or no—Varsities, for instance, means a team is very unlikely to do well.

For the Round 1 competition in November, since there are no subjective events, the individual scores are out of a total of 7,000 points, and team scores are out of 42,000.

The Super Quiz counts as its own standalone event and does not impact over team rankings or scores.

Barring any serious printing issues, coaches will receive a full score report for their team directly following the awards ceremony. Full scores and an awards list will also be emailed out to coaches as soon as possible, usually in the ten minutes following awards, and posted online within a few days.

Awards

Generally, Gold, Silver and Bronze medals (for 1st, 2nd and 3rd places, respectively, honoring all ties) are awarded for each of the GPA divisions in of the ten events in Academic Decathlon. This means that Essay, for instance, will have a Gold, Silver and Bronze medal each for Honors, Scholastics and Varsities for a total of nine medals, plus any ties.

More specific guidelines per competition are as follows.

Round 1

As there is no limit to the number of students who may compete in the Round 1 competition in November, all of them are equally eligible for awards. However, to stop any one team from being dominant at awards solely by virtue of bringing more students than others, only their top three students per GPA bracket in a given event are able to "take" a medaling slot. For example, if a team's Honors division has three students who all achieve

a perfect 1000 on the Art test at the Round 1 competition, and two more from that team score a 920 while the highest-scoring student from another team scores a 900, only those top three students' scores influence where the cutoffs are for a medal. Since they all tied for first place, the silver medal goes to the next highest score from another team, the 900, and the other two students for the first team also receive silver medals.

The same applies to overall individual scores. If the top four Scholastics are all from the same team, the fourth Scholastic from that team as well as the highest-scoring Scholastic from another team both tie for fourth place.

Since so many students and teams compete at the Round 1 competition, the teams are split up into Large and Small school size divisions. Ribbons are awarded for 1st through 5th place overall and in each event in Large and 1st through 3rd in Small.

Regionals

For Regionals competitions, 1.5" medals, Gold through Bronze, are awarded for each event by GPA division. There is also a "Subjectives" medal series for the students with the highest total subjectives scores, i.e. the sum total of their Speech, Interview and Essay scores.

Whether fourth- and fifth-place ribbons are also awarded depends on the region and competition season and will be determined by the competitiveness and number of students competing in the region. You will be informed in January of whether this is the case for your region.

Additionally, the winning team will be crowned Regional Champion and will receive a trophy. In regions with at least four schools, a second-place trophy will also be awarded, and a third-place trophy will be awarded in regions with at least five teams.

School size does not factor into awards for Regionals.

States

For the States competition, 2" medals, Gold through Bronze, are awarded for each event by GPA division, along with fourth- and fifth-place ribbons. As with Regionals, there is an additional "Subjectives" medal series for the students with the highest total subjectives scores, i.e. the sum total of their Speech, Interview and Essay scores. Individual awards are not split by school size.

Additionally, the overall winning team will receive the Henry J. Lukas State Championship Award (as well as the paperwork for Nationals!). The remaining top teams will be awarded based their school size divisions: the next highest-scoring team will be awarded 1st in their size division (even if in the same division as the overall champions), and so on.



School Size Divisions

A school's size division (Large or Small) is determined based on the previous school year's official enrollment count, as provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education. Before the Regionals competition, a list of the season's registered teams ordered by school 9-12 population will be split down the middle. The complete list of competing schools and their size divisions will be emailed out in early November. Please note that this method depends on the teams participating and as such may place some teams in Large one year and Small in the next!

Qualification

All teams may participate in the Regionals competitions, but only the Regional Champions automatically advance to States. The remainder of the 16 slots are wild-card slots that are given to the next highest-scoring teams.

At States, the Henry J. Lukas State Champions qualify for Nationals to represent the state of Massachusetts. The second-place team overall, regardless of school size, also advances as a Division IV qualifier.

General Competition Rules

- If a student is found to be cheating, they will be disqualified from the event in question and may be disqualified from the entire competition. The State Director's decision is final. Competition staff also reserve the right to investigate any peculiarities in scoring that may indicate academic dishonesty.
- No study materials, cellular phones, smart watches, or other wifi-capable accessories may be brought into the testing rooms except in backpacks kept at the front of the room (or whichever space is designated for personal possessions). Any aforementioned electronic devices must be powered off. Students found in possession of any of these items during testing will be disqualified.
- Calculators may only be used during the Mathematics test. They must adhere to the official USAD calculator guidelines posted on the Coaches' Corner.
- Once testing begins, a student may not leave the testing room unless they forfeit the remainder of the time on the current test. If a student is late, they may not make up the missing time.
- Students found to be actively distracting other students during testing may be disqualified.
- Students engaging in aggressive, disruptive, or otherwise disrespectful behavior may be disqualified.



Resources

The Coaches' Corner on our website (massdecathlon.org/coaches_corner.php) is a terrific source for a wealth of important documents and information, including the "registration calendar" that features all of the season's paperwork deadlines on one easy sheet! You can also find coach training materials, links to information on GPA calculation, invoices, links to Google Forms, and more. It should always be your first stop when looking for something!

Additionally, the Results page (<http://massdecathlon.org/results.php>) links to full scores from 2014 onward. (If you have any older scores, let us know!)