



Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How does the *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* work?

A. *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* is trained to score based on hundreds of student essays that have been graded by professional human scorers. Using a technique that evaluates the meaning of text, the computer compares the content and relevant qualities of writing of each of the student responses, along with the scores given to the responses by the human scorers. From these comparisons, it derives a prompt-specific algorithm to predict the scores that the same human scorers would assign to new responses.

In short, *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* measures the quality of essays by determining:

- The language features that human scorers evaluate when scoring a response
- How those features are weighed and combined to produce a score

Q: How does *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* recognize a good essay?

A: *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* assesses the content of an essay, as well as more mechanical aspects of writing. When a student submits an essay for scoring, the system immediately measures the meaning of the essay. It then compares the essay to the training essays, looking for similarities, and assigns a score, in part, by placing the essay in a category with the most similar training essays. Each trait is scored independently in this way. *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* assesses each trait in the student essay, compares it to the training essays, and then categorizes the trait in question.

Q: How does *Prentice Hall EssayScorer's* scoring compare to the way teachers grade writing?

A: *Prentice Hall EssayScorer's* approach mirrors the way that teachers grade essays. For example, when teachers evaluate a student's essay, they look for characteristics that identify an essay as an A, B, or C paper. Their expectations are likely based on their previous experience as a grader and on criteria for the assignment in question. In other words, teachers search for a match between the essay itself and the criteria for a particular grade or score. *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* is trained to mimic this process.

Q: My students seem to be getting higher scores when they write online versus when they write on paper. Why?

A. Students are often better able to craft their responses online. There are many possible reasons for this. First, as digital natives, they are more comfortable typing than they are writing. Second, revising drafts and moving text around is often easier when composing online. Third, the feedback they receive from *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* helps them to revise and improve their drafts.

Q: *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* is scoring lower or higher than I would. What can I do?

A. The *Settings Tool* allows you to adjust the passing threshold for each trait for a given activity. The default passing threshold is 4 on a 6-point scale. If you feel that *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* is scoring too leniently on one or more traits, you can increase the passing threshold for those traits. If you feel that it is scoring too harshly, you can

decrease the passing threshold. You can also adjust the passing threshold for the overall score higher or lower.

Prentice Hall EssayScorer includes essay writing activities for students in grades 6-12. Each prompt is individually trained based on student responses at the given grade level. To make activities more challenging for their students, teachers can assign activities from higher grade levels. To make them less challenging, they can assign activities from lower grader levels.

Q: How does *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* assign an overall score?

A: The overall score is computed by averaging the individual trait scores. The traits are scored on a 6-point scale. For the overall score, **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** can assign a 4- or 6-point score. In the case of a 4-point overall score, the average trait score is scaled. Teachers can use the *Settings Tool* to change the overall score range from its default value.

Q: How are teacher created prompts scored?

A: When evaluating responses to a teacher created prompt, **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** does not have the benefit of a human-scored training set that is specific to the prompt. For teacher created prompts, and for others scored only for an *Overall Writing* score, **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** evaluates an essay for general writing ability only and not for content. **Prentice Hall EssayScorer's** scoring model for these types of prompts was derived by analyzing thousands of human scored student essays across hundreds of prompts.

Q: My student made a minor change and his/her score changed. Why?

A. **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** computes a continuous score, such as 3.46, for each essay. That score is then transformed into a categorical score, such as 3, that is presented to the student. A minor change in an essay may move the continuous score just above or below the cut point for a given categorical score and so can result in a change in score.

Q: How is the Conventions score related to the spelling and grammar feedback?

A. The *Conventions* score is computed in the same way as the other trait scores. **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** evaluates a student's essay by comparing it to the training essays that were scored for *Conventions* by professional human scorers. The spelling and grammar feedback are determined independently to give students feedback on particular spelling and grammar errors in their writing.

Q: Why is *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* not catching some of my students' grammar errors?

A. The grammar checker in **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** tries to strike a balance between providing too much and too little feedback. Providing more feedback may result in incorrectly identified grammar errors. While adults are very good at taking feedback returned from programs such as Microsoft Word® and ignoring incorrect reports of grammar errors, students are still in the process of gathering the experience and knowledge to make such decisions. **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** tries to catch as many grammar errors as possible while not confusing or misleading students.

Pearson is always working to improve **Prentice Hall EssayScorer's** grammar checking capabilities to provide accurate feedback and suggestions.

Q: What can I do about the grammar errors that *Prentice Hall EssayScorer* misses?

A. Using the *Teacher Comments* feature, teachers can add personalized feedback to their students, including flagging particular grammar errors for correction. This feature is found in the *Portfolio* and *Student Response Display* reports.

Q: How can my students indent their paragraphs?

A. Students can use the space bar to indent their writing. The tab key does not indent, but rather moves the focus of control from the text input area to the *Get Feedback* button. This tab key behavior is necessary to help make **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** accessible to students of all physical abilities.

Q: Why wasn't my student's essay scored?

A: Before scoring a response, **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** first evaluates the accuracy with which it can do so. If **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** is not confident that it can return an accurate score, it will instead return a message suggesting that the student review the essay with his or her teacher. This can happen for a variety of reasons. First, the essay may be too short to evaluate the skill level of the student. Second, it may be much longer than expected for an essay. Third, it may not be as expected based on **Prentice Hall EssayScorer's** experience.

Prentice Hall EssayScorer is trained on hundreds of student essays written by students at the grade level specified for the given prompt. Based on these essays, **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** has certain expectations about the content, style, and skill level of the writing. If a new essay does not meet these expectations, then **Prentice Hall EssayScorer** will not be confident enough in its ability to score the essay accurately to return a score. The reasons for this include:

- The essay may be off-topic or it may be highly creative.
- The essay may not be a good faith essay. For example, it may be a refusal to write.
- The essay may demonstrate a skill level that is very different from the expected skill level. For example, this can happen when a 6th grade student is asked to respond to a 12th grade prompt and vice versa.
- The essay may be in all capital letters and thus not demonstrate appropriate formal writing style.
- The essay may include too much repeated content, such as copying and pasting the same paragraph over and over.
- The essay may not look like an essay. For example, it may be just a list of words or contain little to no punctuation.