

# DSST Exam Scoring 101



When determining what a passing score should be on any given exam there are different approaches. One approach is not necessarily better than the other – they are just different ways of arriving at the same place. The scoring changes applied to the 10 refreshed DSST exams are essentially just a difference in the way we determine what a passing score should be. There should be little or no impact to students.

## Criterion-Referenced Standard Setting

The new scoring model applied to the 10 DSST exams refreshed in 2008 is called “criterion-referenced.” This method sets cut scores based on judgments about individual test questions or the test as a whole. It determines how many of the test questions must be answered correctly in order to pass. Criterion-referenced scores are based on how much the examinees know, not how they performed against others in the same pool.

## Norm-Referenced Standard Setting

Historically, DSST exams have been scored using a “norm referenced” approach to determine the pass/fail point for each exam. Using a norm-referenced approach, a cut-score is set based on judgments about groups of test takers; essentially, it establishes what proportions of each group should pass or fail. Setting a proportion of candidates to pass or fail means that whether you pass or fail is based on how you perform in relation to others within the same group. This method is widely used, especially in education, and the DSST exams that have NOT been refreshed continue to use it today.

### SCENARIO B:

#### Criterion-Referenced Standard Setting

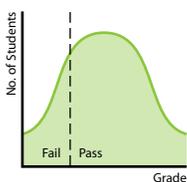
Mr. Jones decides that each individual student taking his math test will need to answer 70% of the questions on the exam correctly to pass. Since Bill gets 85% of the questions right, he passes because he answered more than 70% of the questions correctly (as predefined by Mr. Jones). Susie gets 65% of the questions right. Because she did not answer at least 70% of the questions correctly, she fails. Whether or not Bill or Susie passes is entirely dependent on whether they answered a certain percentage of questions correctly. It has nothing at all to do with how they performed on the exam in relation to each other or to the rest of the class – or whether their score fell in the “top 75% of all scores” (as in scenario A).

### SCENARIO A:

#### Norm-Referenced Standard Setting

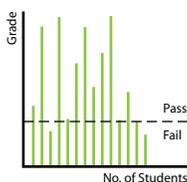
Mr. Jones teaches a math class with 30 students in it. On the upcoming exam, Mr. Jones decides that all students with scores in the top 75% will pass. Once the exam is given, Mr. Jones takes ALL the scores, compares them to each other – and then accepts the highest 75% of scores as passing. In this case, it does not matter if Bill answered 85% of the questions correctly and Susie only answered 70% correctly because when looking at all the scores for all 30 students, both Bill and Susie got scores that fell among the top 75%. Bill and Susie, as well as the other students who fell in the top 75% of scores, pass. The students in the class who scored in the lowest 25% will not pass, because as compared against the other students, they did not place in the top 75% (the “cutoff” set by Mr. Jones).

#### Norm-Referenced



Passing score based on judgments and performance of group being tested.

#### Criterion-Referenced



Passing score based on judgments and performance of individual being tested.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Why did Prometric change the scoring for refreshed exams?

In the testing industry, there has been a movement toward using criterion-referenced methodologies as it is a more widely accepted model. CLEP and most college courses rely on this method of establishing the cut score, so it made sense for DSST exams to head in that direction as well. Since we were updating the content of some of the exams anyway, it also made sense to package the standard-setting and score reporting changes with the content changes. In terms of timing, we thought we'd piggyback on the content updates and use it as an opportunity to bring the scoring more in line with what is becoming a more common and widely used method.

### What was wrong with the previous way of scoring?

Nothing was "wrong" with it and Prometric continues to use norm-referenced standard-setting and a smaller score scale in all other non-refreshed DSST exams. Both standard-setting methods are accurate and reliable and one way is not necessarily better than the other. Across the testing industry there has been a general movement toward using criterion-referenced standard-setting. CLEP exams are handled this way – and so we thought it would make sense to begin converting DSST exams.

### Why is the scoring scale 200-500?

The best way to explain this is through an analogy. Temperature can be measured using either degrees Celsius or degrees Fahrenheit, which are different scales of measurement. The point at which water boils is the same, but it is expressed differently at 100° or 212° depending on which scale is used. The DSST scale works similarly; because different versions of each exam could require slightly different numbers of items to be answered correctly in order to pass, converting all scores to a common scale means the minimum passing score can remain exactly the same across all exams. The 200-500 scale is simply a way of equating one to the other to "level the playing field." The numbers themselves are representative – they were arbitrarily selected for the purpose of creating a scale.

### Are students penalized for guessing wrong answers?

No, students are not penalized on any exam (refreshed or not) for wrong answers. Students are awarded points for correct answers. If a student answers incorrectly, they simply don't get awarded the point for that question.

### Are all questions weighted evenly?

Yes. All exam questions carry the same weight. Students are awarded points for correct answers. If a student answers incorrectly, they simply don't get awarded the point for that question, but they are not penalized.

### How are essays scored on the exams that have them?

Only one DSST exam requires an essay and it is hand-scored.

### What does the scoring change mean for students?

It really doesn't have much, if any, impact on students. Students taking one of the refreshed DSST exams will need to answer a certain pre-defined percentage of the questions correctly in order to pass. The different versions of a given exam may vary in difficulty, but the number of test questions required to pass is adjusted to accommodate any differences in difficulty – for example, students receiving a more difficult version of a test will be required to answer a lower percentage of questions correctly in order to pass. The percentage of test questions required to pass each exam fall within a range as follows:

EXAM	% CORRECT TO PASS
Criminal Justice	61-66%
Ethics in America	46-50%
Fundamentals of College Algebra	38-47%
Here's to Your Health	59-63%
Introduction to Computing	59-63%
Introduction to World Religions	46-50%
Management Information Systems	58-62%
Personal Finance	57-62%
Principles of Statistics	42-46%
Substance Abuse (Drug/Alcohol Abuse)	53-57%



GETCOLLEGE CREDIT.COM  
877.471.9860

