

State of Michigan

2026-2027 PATRIOT'S PEN ESSAY PROGRAM

Each year nearly 68,800 students in sixth through eighth grades enter the Patriot's Pen youth essay contest nationally, for a chance to win their share of more than \$1.4 million in state and national awards.

The essay contest encourages young minds to examine America's history, along with their own experiences in modern American society, by writing a 300–400-word essay expressing their views based on a patriotic theme chosen by the VFW Commander-in-Chief.

2026-2027 PATRIOT'S PEN ESSAY THEME “What a Veteran Taught Me About America.”

All information pertaining to the theme, judging, eligibility, awards, and other aspects of this program are contained in the Veterans of Foreign Wars program booklet for the Annual Patriot's Pen Essay Program. **District Commanders are responsible to ensure that their District Chairman are conducting their programs within these rules and deadlines. District Commanders are solely responsible for the conduct of the programs within their Districts.** Make sure that copies of this program are distributed to all the Posts within your District in sufficient time to ensure that there is a successful competition.

The Patriot's Pen Essay program is a joint program with the VFW Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars of Michigan. The Auxiliary does not need the permission of a Post to participate in the program. Post and District Chairman are expected to include their VFW Auxiliary Counterparts in all activities concerning the conduct of the local and District programs. Coordination of the District program is the responsibility of the District Commanders and District Chairman. Post Chairman must refer to their District program for the program requirements and deadlines.

Judging the Contest

The suggested number of judges is five to nine, with a minimum of three. Judges must be from outside your Posts and Auxiliaries and should represent your community. Judges must not in any way be connected to the students in the competition. Failure to follow these judging rules could result in your student being disqualified. Set the date for your judging and invite the judges at least 60 days in advance. Be sure to remind your judges a week before the competition with a letter or email, and two days before with a phone call.

Eligibility

Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Grade students in public, private, parochial, and home schools in the State of Michigan. Former first place winners at the State and National level of competition or any Foreign Exchange students are not eligible. Students do not have to be relatives of a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars or its VFW Auxiliary to participate.

Essays

Essays must be typed, or computer printed in English, between 300-400 words, on a single sheet of paper, with no added color or art.

Posts

To receive credit for participation in the Patriot's Pen Essay Competition, a Post must sponsor the program in their community. While it is important to offer the Patriot's Pen Essay Program in our schools, it is not solely a program for the schools. You may offer the competition to any sixth, seventh, or eighth grade student. All entries must be submitted directly to the Post. They may be sponsored through local schools, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Church youth groups, Junior ROTC programs, the home schooled, etc. Posts are encouraged to solicit participants from as many sources as possible. The Post will hold their own judging and may submit to the District the number of students permitted by the following:

- 1-15 Student Participants: 1 Top Post entry is allowed to advance to District.
- 16-30 Student Participants: 2 Top Post entries are allowed to advance to District.
- 31-45 Student Participants: 3 Top Post entries are allowed to advance to District, etc.

Note: No Limit

Posts may advance as many winners as they select based on the total number of students participating. Post judging is the responsibility of the Post Chairman and must be conducted in accordance with the National Judging Criteria. The Post may forward each first-place winning entry to the District. Each student entry submitted by a Post to the District must be an equal first place winner. This means that each Post student entry must receive the same award. For example, a Post has fifty-five student entries and is eligible to send four entries to the District for judging. Those four entries must each receive an equal first place award from the Post. If the Post lists them as first, second, third and fourth place, then they can only send in one entry as the first-place winner. **Note: First place Post winner's entry packets must include a completed Student Biographical Questionnaire, a School Release Form and a quality head and shoulder photograph, wallet size only, when sent to the District. Post packets will not be accepted unless complete.**

School/Youth Group Competition Alternatives

We offer teachers/youth leaders the option to use the Patriot's Pen as a writing exercise. The teacher/leader may submit all the entries to the Post for judging or conduct a judging within the group or class and advance a winner for every fifteen participants as shown above. Note: The Post Chairman should make this decision working closely with the teacher or group leader.

Districts

Each District shall be responsible for the conduct of the program and judging of entries within their District. District Chairman are expected to promote the expansion of the program by encouraging the participation of additional Posts. It is not always possible to restrict sponsorship strictly along VFW District Boundaries. Posts may solicit student participation from any geographical area within the State of Michigan if they do not interfere with the sponsorship of other Posts. District Chairman are expected to assist Posts in the coordination of sponsorship of all schools in the District. It is unacceptable that a school is not contacted. Each District may submit only one entry to the Department for judging. This entry must be certified on the proper National Entry Form by the District Chairman to be the District First place winner of the District Program Judging. The following items **MUST** accompany the District Entry to the Department for Judging:

- One Student Essay in accordance with the above rules.
- One completed student entry from the National Program Booklet.
- A quality head and shoulder photograph, wallet size only.
- One signed School Release Form (Link below).
- One Student Biographical Questionnaire (Link below) must accompany your District Winner.

It is the responsibility of District Chairman to ensure that all materials are included. Any entry that does not include all the required above items may not be judged.

Reporting

It is the responsibility of the **Post, District, and Department officers** to input the Patriot Pen entries into the All-American Dashboard. This is to include all the monetary values spent on this program. Failure to do so can cause the Post, District, and/or Department to show a NOT MET in this category.

Deadlines

The deadline for Post sponsored entries is **October 31, 2026**. Post judging may not be held before **November 1, 2026**, and must be completed by November 9, 2026, to ensure that winning entries are delivered to the District Chairman by **November 16, 2026**. District judging may not be held before **November 16, 2026**, and must be completed by **November 30, 2026**, to ensure that the winning entry with all required materials is in the hands of the Department Director by **December 11, 2026**. The Department deadline for District entries is **December 11, 2026**. This deadline is absolute, and it includes all paperwork as well as the Student Biographical Questionnaire, School Release Form and Wallet Size photo. Department judging will be closed and will be the responsibility of the Department Committee. Please be advised that the state judging will be attended only by the VFW Department Committee members, VFW State Auxiliary Committee members, and the State Judges. The Committee has the authority to disqualify from the Department judging any entry which is in violation of the rules stated in the Department Program and the National Program Booklet.

Awards

All Post and District awards are the responsibility of those organizations. Department awards will be presented at the 2026 Department of Michigan Mid-Winter Conference. All District winners are expected to be present. Each District must assume the cost of their winner's transportation, meals, and lodging. Department will provide each District winner with one banquet ticket. Banquet tickets for family members and other guests are the sole responsibility of the District in cooperation with the sponsoring Post.

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