

**VOICE OF DEMOCRACY
AND PATRIOT'S PEN**

CHAIRPERSON'S GUIDE



VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS®

Voice of Democracy Democracy and Patriot's Pen Chairperson's Guide



The Role of the Chairperson

The VFW's chairpersons do more than just plan projects to improve their communities. They also recruit volunteers, build relationships with community leaders, organize partnerships with civic groups, and promote the VFW.

You Are the Point Person

A program chairperson should understand one important fact right from the outset: You are the Post's point person in your community. As chairperson you will be your Post's liaison to:

- school teachers and administrators
- community leaders
- local military personnel
- city government officials
- members of civic groups
- members of the media
- your fellow veterans

Seek out these new relationships. When it comes time to recruit volunteers or you need specialized expertise for Post projects, these community contacts will prove invaluable.

Project an outgoing, friendly personality. Speak positively about your Post, your community and your projects. Articulate your thoughts and plans clearly, concisely and coherently. Remember, you represent not only your Post, but the entire VFW organization as well.

Reporting Your Activities

You may have heard it said that "the job's not over until the paperwork is done!" That is especially true of VFW Programs.

Check with your respective Department chairperson to learn what should be reported and in what form. Documentation of your programmatic efforts is the thing that ensures the VFW's reputation and our not-for-profit status.

Master Organizational Skills

As chairperson, your talents must be varied. Consequently, your organizational skills should be fully developed.

Some of your specific duties include:

- recruiting and maintaining a pool of active volunteers
- identifying and initiating programs needed in your community
- motivating your Post members, community volunteers and sponsors involved in your various projects
- recognizing your volunteers efforts
- organizing and maintaining records, photos and news paper clippings the document your activities
- reporting to your Department chairperson the volunteer hours, dollars donated by the VFW, VFW Auxiliary and Cooties members and other information requested.

Through the contacts you've developed in your community, cooperate with other civic or fraternal groups. They may already be involved in community service programs you would like to undertake, or they may be eager to help with projects that you've planned. Also identify resources at your Post, talk with members and find out what special skills or hobbies they may have.

VFW Scholarships

At the turn of the 20th century, the founders of the Veterans of Foreign Wars created an organization that would honor and serve veterans and perpetuate the values and ideals for which those veterans had served. Although men of vision, it is doubtful they could imagine the millions of Americans impacted today by the VFW's youth, scholarship and recognition programs. Every year, tens of thousands of students nationwide participate in the Voice of Democracy Scholarship Competition and the Patriot's Pen Essay Contest, garnering more than \$3 million in scholarships, awards, and incentives.

Patriot's Pen Essay Contest

Patriot's Pen gives 6th, 7th and 8th grade students the opportunity to express their opinion on a patriotic theme and improve their writing skills, while they compete for awards and prizes. Cumulatively, the awards provided from all levels of the competition total \$1.2 million each year. Each Department's (state) first-place winner competes for \$55,000 in award money at the national level with the first-place national winner receiving \$5,000 and a trip to Founding Forward at Valley Forge Spirit of America Seminar. Each state winner will receive at least \$500 at the national level.

Voice of Democracy Scholarship Competition

The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) started the Voice of Democracy Scholarship Competition in 1947. The Veterans of Foreign Wars became a national sponsor in the late 1950s and assumed sole responsibility for the program in 1961. Many notables have participated in the Voice of Democracy including journalist Charles Kuralt, Miss America Anita Bryant and former U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft. The Voice of Democracy competition provides high school freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors the opportunity to write and record an audio essay on a patriotic theme, competing for more than \$2.1 million in college scholarships and incentives. Each first place Department (state) winner is brought to Founding Forward at Valley Forge Spirit of America Seminar and compete for \$171,000 in national college scholarships— first place receiving \$35,000. Each state winner will receive at least \$1,000 at the national level.

Promote the Programs

Contact all schools and youth groups in your area in the spring (before the school year ends) and again in the Fall after school starts, to make them aware of these opportunities. Contact the media in September to help you publicize the programs and again in November and December to announce your winners after the judging. Encourage teachers and other youth leaders to visit the VFW web site at vfw.org/community/youth-and-education/youth-scholarships.

Your Commitment

To ensure a successful competition, Posts and Auxiliaries must commit knowledgeable chairpersons, enthusiastic volunteers and resources to both competitions. Our goal is to increase the number of participating students every year. Approach schools in the spring because that is when most curriculum decisions are made for the coming Fall. In late summer, revisit to ensure they have the necessary materials and are prepared to do the program. Don't hesitate to involve school administrators, PTA/PTO/PSO parents, teachers, counselors, radio and TV stations, newspapers, churches and other service, civic and community groups/organizations to encourage and facilitate student participation, help with the judging and generally promote the programs. We provide score sheets, brochures, sample news releases and PSAs on vfw.org – you would **log in** at vfw.org as a VFW member, then click on My VFW and look for the VFW Training and Support section under the **Member Resources** column. Then click on **Citizenship Education, Youth Scholarships and Activities**. Present VFW Scholarship Programs anywhere there are groups of students who might be interested. In addition to schools and home school programs; chairpersons should consider church youth groups, athletic teams, and Boy Scout and Girl Scout units – any place where young people can be reached.

Work Together

The VFW chairpersons, the Auxiliary chairpersons and volunteers should work together. It is the responsibility of the chairperson to recruit and equip their volunteers with the basic contest details to conduct a successful scholarship program from start to finish.

Deadlines

The deadlines for both Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen are as follows:

1. **Midnight, October 31**, Entries to the Post*
2. **November 15**, Completion of Post judging**
3. **December 15**, Completion of District judging**
4. **January 10**, Completion of Department judging**
5. **January 15**, District participation reports to Department chairperson**
6. **January 15**, Department winners to National *
7. **January 31**, Department reports to National*

*required deadlines ** suggested deadlines

Order or Download Materials Early

Order or download and print out Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen student entry forms early in the year so you can provide a copy to anyone who needs one. These forms explain the programs: complete rules, who can enter, how to enter, how schools can handle the program and how students and teachers can connect with a VFW Post to present their entries. The entry forms can be downloaded online at vfw.org/community/youth-and-education/youth-scholarships. Anyone (students, teachers, chairpersons, etc) can visit these web pages. The new themes are announced and new entry forms will be available by April 1 annually...for the following Oct. 31 student entry deadline.

Additional program items, student awards and gifts are available through the VFW Store at 833.839.8387, or online at vfwstore.org.

All information needed for chairperson to conduct the programs is available online now under "My VFW."

VFW chairpersons can visit vfw.org where you would log in as a VFW member (then click on "My VFW.") **Under the Member Resources** heading you would click on VFW Training and Support. Go to the **Community Service & Youth Programs** area. If you have any questions, or you need assistance, please e-mail the Youth Scholarships Coordinator, VFW Programs, VFW National Headquarters in Kansas City, Mo., at youthscholarships@vfw.org or call 816.756.3390.

Judging the Contest

For both Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen (at each level of competition) the suggested number of judges is five to nine (or a minimum of three). Judges should be from outside your Posts/Auxiliaries and should represent your community. Leaders from education, broadcasting, corporations, small business, and other fraternal and civic groups are ideal. Judges must not be connected in any way with the students in the competition. Set the date for your judging and invite the judges at least 90 days in advance. Remind them a week before the competition with a letter or email, and two days before with a telephone call.

Ask permission to publicize their selection (along with the program) to the media, then follow up after the judging with a thank you. Invite them to your awards event and publicly express your appreciation for their help. A judges award citation is available through the VFW Store 833.839.8387 (item number #4363 for Voice of Democracy and #4329 for Patriot's Pen).

All Patriot's Pen essays and Voice of Democracy audio essays should be reviewed by the chairperson several days before the judging, so that small errors like too many words, audio that will not play on your equipment, a Voice of Democracy audio essay that is a bit too long/short, or a reference that inadvertently identifies them might be corrected by the student rather than a chairperson eliminating them from the competition.

Chairpersons should never forget that our priority is to increase the number of students participating, rather than eliminate them. Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen judging may be conducted either in person or remotely. If Patriot's Pen judging is done in person, each judge should be provided their own copy of the essays and a score sheet (score sheets are available online on My VFW.)

Voice of Democracy entries must be judged on the audio recording only, judges should not see a typed copy of the essay, unless clarification is needed. All Patriot's Pen essays and Voice of Democracy recordings should be identified by number to ensure the anonymity of the competitor. Competitors should never be asked to present their essay in person during the actual judging. Judges should be discouraged from discussing the Patriot's Pen essays or Voice of Democracy audio recordings during the judging process and should have no contact with the competitors. They should not see a photograph of the competitor. The judges' decisions are always FINAL.

Judging Criteria

Voice of Democracy contestants are judged on the following criteria:

- Originality** (possible 35 pts.) Treatment of the theme should show imagination and human interest.
- Content** (possible 30 pts.) Ideas are expressed clearly and in an organized manner.
- Delivery** (possible 35 pts.) Speaking voice is clear and credible.

Patriot's Pen contestants are judged on the following criteria:

- Theme knowledge** (possible 30 pts.) Has the student researched and understood the theme?
- Theme development** (possible 35 pts.) Does the essay answer relevant questions: who, what, where and why?
- Clarity of ideas** (possible 35 pts.) Is the writer's interpretation of the theme presented clearly?

REMEMBER ... INTERPRETATION OF THE THEME IS UP TO THE STUDENT. ENTRIES SHOULD NOT BE DISQUALIFIED BECAUSE THEIR INTERPRETATION SEEMS INCORRECT OR INAPPROPRIATE.

Local Competition Alternatives

Recently, teachers and school leaders have shown reluctance to participate in our scholarship competition if they devote precious class time to completing entry forms and (in the case of the Voice of Democracy) record essays. For this reason, we offer teachers/youth leaders the option to simply use Voice of Democracy or Patriot's Pen as a writing exercise. The teacher/leader may submit all entries to the Post for judging or conduct a judging within the group/class and advance a winner for every fifteen (15) participants. Note: This decision should be determined by the Post chairperson; working closely with the teacher or group leader.

School/Youth Group to Post (both Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen)

- 1- 15 essays – One (1) entry to Post
- 16-30 essays – Two (2) entries
- 31-45 essays – Three (3) entries

(NOTE: no limit)

Post Competition

Post entries are required to include the following:
Patriot's Pen: Typed essay in English of 300-400 words (+/- 5 words -- no graphics) and a student entry form completed legibly. All words must be counted (except the theme).

Voice of Democracy: Typed essay, audio CD (or flash/USB drive) of the recorded essay (3-5 minutes, +/- 5 seconds), and a student entry form completed legibly. Please refer to the student Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen entry forms to review the complete rules and guidelines. For both programs, Posts must accept and judge all eligible entries received by midnight, October 31. If a Post decides on a later student entry deadline that is acceptable, as long as they can meet the District deadline for submitting their Post winner(s).

Post to District (for both Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen)

- 1- 15 essays – One (1) entry to District
- 16-30 essays – Two (2) entries
- 31-45 essays – Three (3) entries

District to Department

One (1) entry per District **(with student's head & shoulders photo added at this time for first-place District winner.)**
This applies to both Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen.

Judging Audio

For Voice of Democracy, the preferred audio format is Flash Drive/USBs or electronically submitted, via an audio file attached to an email. Once Flash Drives/USBs or electronically submitted audio files are received, be sure to play back the audio, to verify that the audio file plays clearly and follows submission rules.

NOTE: Posts, Districts and Departments should never reject an entry because they are unable to play an audio file. Part of the chairperson's responsibility is to review the entries to ensure appropriate equipment is available to properly judge the entry.

Special Needs Student Criteria

The Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen competitions are offered to the public primarily through our nation's school systems. In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, we provide "reasonable accommodation" for someone with a documented permanent disability. Requests for accommodation must be submitted in writing with the student's entry materials.

As an example, a hearing/speech-impaired student may select another student of the same age and gender to read and record their Voice of Democracy essay. The volunteer assisting the disabled student is not eligible for any scholarship compensation, awards or benefits from the program. Use of AI/ Computer Generated voices is not allowed. All questions regarding accommodation of a disabled student should be directed to the Programs Department, VFW National Headquarters at 816.756.3390 or youthscholarships@vfw.org.

Concerns Regarding AI Detection Software in Essay Evaluation

Overview

As the VFW Voice of Democracy program continues to promote original thought and patriotic expression among youth, there is growing concern about the use of AI detection software to verify the authenticity of student essays. While the intent is to ensure fairness, the current technology presents significant risks and inconsistencies that could jeopardize the integrity of the program and unfairly penalize participants

Key Issues with AI Detection Software

1. Lack of Accuracy and Reliability

- AI detection tools often produce **false positives**, flagging human-written content as AI-generated due to stylistic simplicity or use of common phrases.
- Conversely, false negatives can occur when AI-generated content mimics human writing well enough to bypass detection.

- These inconsistencies make it impossible to confidently determine authorship, especially among high school students whose writing may naturally resemble AI output.

2. No Standardized Benchmark

- There is no universally accepted standard for AI detection. Different tools yield different results for the same essay, leading to confusion and potential bias.
- The lack of transparency in how these tools operate further undermines their credibility in formal evaluation settings. Spell check and Grammar check is using AI- this is an acceptable use of AI. Every high school has a policy on AI usage. High school students are very familiar with it.

3. Risk to Students and the Organization

- Accusing a student of using AI without definitive proof can cause emotional distress, damage reputations, and discourage future participation.
- The VFW could face legal or reputational consequences if a student or parent challenges an accusation based on unreliable software.

4. Ethical and Educational Implications

- Overreliance on AI detection may shift focus away from mentorship and education, replacing trust with suspicion.
- It risks punishing creativity or unique writing styles that don't conform to algorithmic expectations.

The Approach for VFW

- **Human-Centered Review:** Continue using experienced judges to evaluate essays based on content, originality, and emotional impact.
- **Educational Outreach:** Provide guidance to students on responsible use of technology and the importance of authentic expression.

- **Transparency and Fairness:** Avoid punitive measures based solely on AI detection results. If concerns arise, engage students in dialogue rather than accusation.
- In addition, with our new themes, they are personal in nature, and they must include specific instances of how they lived up to the theme.
- Lastly, the judging has been changed to reflect the originality as a higher score and weighted higher than anything else.

Reporting Guidelines

VFW Post, District and Department reporting must be completed on the All-American Dashboard as of Aug. 1, 2019. Adjutants are the official corresponding officer for the Post, District and Department, and they will collect participation reports from their chairperson, and will submit their reports on the All-American Dashboard through the Online Membership System (OMS). January 15 is the deadline for District reports to be submitted and the deadline for Department reports to be submitted is January 31. For step by step instructions on how to submit your reports on the All-American Dashboard view the guide [here](#).

(NOTE: The state winners' packet deadline is two weeks earlier- January 15.) Please ensure that a photograph of your Department winner is included, along with the notification date.

For Further Information on Voice of Democracy or Patriot's Pen, contact:

Youth Scholarships Coordinator

VFW Programs
VFW National Headquarters 406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, Missouri 64111
816.968.2787

