



2025-2026 Essay Contest Rules

2025-26 Essay Topic:

“How My Acts of Service Help Me Understand What My Community Means to Me”

Purpose

This contest is sponsored by Optimist International to give young people room to develop their own views around a central idea. In addition to the opportunity for written expression, participants have the chance to win a college scholarship!

How to Enter

Interested students should submit essays on the assigned topic to their local Optimist Club. The essays are judged at the Club level and District level. All Club submissions should be run through a plagiarism checker before being forwarded to the next level.

Eligibility Criteria

The contest is open to contestants under the age of **19** as of October 1st of the current Optimist International contest year (October 1 – September 30) **and who have not yet completed secondary school or its equivalent, including CEGEP students in Québec, Canada.** There is no minimum age.

U.S. contestants attending school on a military installation outside the United States are eligible to enter in their last U.S. home of record. Contestants residing in non-Districted areas where there are no Optimist Clubs are not eligible for competition.

Length

700-800 words (Title, footnotes and bibliography are not included in the final word count). Hyphenated words count as one (1) word. Words are to be counted manually.

Judging Deadlines

The deadline for contestants to submit essays is determined by the sponsoring Club, usually between Jan 1st and Feb 1st to allow sufficient time for the judges. The deadline for Clubs to submit their winning essay to the District Chair is **February 28.**

District entries are judged and submitted to the Optimist International Programs Department no later than **April 15, 2026.** District winners will be notified by a letter from OI between April 15 and June 1.

Prizes

Scholarships are awarded to students in the United States and the Caribbean in US dollars and in Canadian dollars for Canadian students.

Club level – Medallion or Certificate

The Club level awards may be given in the form of a scholarship, savings bond or cash prize but are completely discretionary.

District level - plaque and a \$2,500 college scholarship for first place winners.

Official Rules

Each contestant must be given a copy of the rules and must complete the entry form. The rules contain information about the contest, judging and awards.

Section I - General Rules

1. The Optimist International Essay Contest is divided into two levels of competition: Club and District.
2. Contestants must enter through a local Optimist Club.
3. Contestants must compose an original essay with limited guidance from others. Webster's Dictionary defines an essay as an analytic or interpretive literary composition. Works of fiction or poetry will not be accepted.
4. All District-level contests must have a minimum of 3 contestants participating. There is no such requirement at the local Club level.
5. Optimist International will have the right to edit, publish or otherwise duplicate any essay entered into the contest without payment to the author.

Section II - Qualifications for Contestants

1. The contest is open to contestants under the age of **19** as of October 1st of the current Optimist International contest year (October 1 – September 30) **and who have not yet completed secondary school or its equivalent, including CEGEP students in Québec, Canada.** There is no minimum age. Contestants must enter in the District in which they reside. U.S. contestants attending school on a military installation outside the United States are eligible to enter in their last home of record. Contestants residing in non- Districted areas where there are no Optimist Clubs are not eligible for competition.
2. Contestants are eligible for only one Club's essay contest during any given year. (October 1st - September 30th)
3. No individual having previously won a District Essay scholarship will be eligible to compete at any level of the competition again.

4. All contestants at each level of the contest must provide age and identification from their birth certificate or passport before participating. A copy of the document is only needed for District winners.

Section III - Contest Rules

1. Participants must write on the official contest topic.
2. Each entry must begin with a title page containing topic, number of words, writer's name, address, phone number, name of school and date of birth.
3. The official topic should be at the top of title page and at the top of page 1. (penalty of 3 pts)
4. Essays must be typed, double-spaced and single-sided. (Deduction of 5 points per each infraction – max. 15 pts.) each infraction – max. 15 pts.)
5. Essays must contain at least 700 words but no more than 800 words. Every word of the essay is counted. This does not include the title, bibliography, or footnotes. Hyphenated words count as 1 word. (Deduction of 5 points for each 25 words over/under limit – French Essays will allow 50 words over/under for the deduction). Words are to be counted manually.
6. Each page of the essay must be numbered starting with page 1, not the title page. The numbers must be centered at the bottom of each page.
7. Any quotations or copyrighted material used in the essay must be identified properly, using a recognized citation format. For example, identify use of a specific writer's format (such as MLA, APA, Chicago-style). Failure to identify non-original material will result in disqualification.
8. No reference can be made in the essay that identifies the contestant, parents, school, community, sponsoring Optimist Club or District. (Deduction of 5 points or fraction based on degree of identification).
9. An essay should be written in English, or it may be written in French or Spanish if the language used is accepted by the District of entry.
10. The entry must be stapled together in the upper left- hand corner. Covers of any type are not accepted.

Section IV – Judging

1. Judging will be completed by a panel of three qualified judges who are not acquainted with the contestants. At the Club level, judges may be Optimist Members. At the District level, judges must be non-Optimists. (Friends of Optimists are excluded and can be used as judges).
2. In an effort to conceal the identity of each contestant, each entry will be anonymized and assigned a number by the Essay Contest Chair. The assigned number will be placed on the title page and page 1 of the essay. The title page will then be detached and retained by the Essay Contest Chair. The judges will be given the essays bearing only the assigned numbers.

3. Judges will not discuss or compare essays being judged.
4. Only judges can assign a penalty or award points.

Section V – Scoring of Contest

Scoring procedures at all levels of the contest will be identical.

1. Material Organization (Logical interpretation of the subject, adherence to topic): 30 points
2. Creativity – 15 points
3. Vocabulary and Style (Phrasing and continuity): 30 points
4. Grammar, Punctuation, Spelling: 20 points
5. Adherence to contest rules (prepared in the proper format): 5 points

Section VI – Penalties

1. Failure to list official topic: 3 points
2. Failure to identify total number of words: 5 points
3. Failure to type essay, double-spaced and single-sided: 5 points per infraction (max 15 pts.)
4. Failure to stay within the 700-800 word limit: 5 points for each 25 words over/under limit
French Essays will allow 50 words over/under for the deduction). Words are to be counted manually.
5. Self-identification: 5 points or fraction based on degree

Section VII - Awards

Only Optimist International awards obtained from Shumsky or Ansell are to be given at all Club and District level contests.

Club level - medallion or certificate

1. Clubs are allowed to give monetary awards of up to \$500 per winner for the Essay contest in addition to the official medallions. The Club level awards may be given in the form of a scholarship, savings bond or cash prize but are completely discretionary.
2. District level - plaque and a \$2,500 college scholarship for the first place winner
 - A. Scholarships are paid through the Optimist International Foundations in the United States and Caribbean and the Canadian Children's Optimist Foundation in Canada.
 - B. Scholarships awarded are for use only at a college, university, or trade school.
 - C. All scholarships will be payable to the educational institution of the recipient's choice, subject to the approval of Optimist International.
 - D. All scholarships will be administered by Optimist International.

E. Winners of an Optimist International scholarship must claim their scholarship by the age of 25.

The Optimist Creed

Promise Yourself ...

To be so strong that nothing can disturb your peace of mind.

To talk health, happiness and prosperity to every person you meet.

To make all your friends feel that there is something in them.

To look at the sunny side of everything and make your optimism come true.

To think only of the best, to work only for the best and to expect only the best.

To be just as enthusiastic about the success of others as you are about your own.

To forget the mistakes of the past and press on to the greater achievements of the future.

To wear a cheerful countenance at all times and give every living creature you meet a smile.

To give so much time to the improvement of yourself that you have no time to criticize others.

To be too large for worry, too noble for anger, too strong for fear, and too happy to permit the presence of trouble