



Essay Application Guide

2025-2026

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Essay Application Guide



At the U.S. Chamber Foundation, we define civics as the knowledge, skills, and disposition every person needs to exercise their rights and fulfill their responsibilities in our democracy. Every day, citizens contribute in different ways—through volunteering, voting, serving on juries, entrepreneurship, or simply by sharing their community experiences—all of which strengthen our civil society.

For this year's National Civics Bee®, we want to know how you can make a difference in your community!

Think about the communities you might belong to: schools, religious organizations, charitable groups, towns, states, or neighborhoods. All these groups require the contributions of individuals to support them so that they can do their essential work.

In your answer, identify a specific opportunity, problem, or challenge in your community. What will you do to make a positive impact, and why does it matter?

Be sure to include how your solution includes a Founding Principle or demonstrates a Civic Virtue through your actions.

Founding Principles are an important starting point for solutions to community needs. They provide us with a framework for understanding how we can best work together in a free society. We call them Founding Principles because they form the foundation of our communities and government. These core ideas of the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution help guide us today.

Examples include natural/inalienable rights, consent of the governed, equality, rule of law, and private property.

Civic Virtues go hand in hand with Founding Principles. They are habits that help us ensure we are acting in the best interest of the community. They also help guide us because the more we practice Civic Virtues, the more we uphold individual freedom and the common good. Examples include: humility, integrity, moderation, respect, and responsibility.



More information about Founding Principles and Civic Virtues can be found here:

<https://billofrightsinstitute.org/resources/principles-and-virtues>

By upholding Founding Principles, practicing Civic Virtues, and using our unique talents, people across our nation can support each other. Working together is essential in a democratic society. When thinking about your solution, remember to consider the individuals and organizations you would work with to accomplish your solution. By collaborating with diverse partners in your community, including elected officials and leaders from businesses and nonprofits, you can harness the collective power necessary to create meaningful change in our democracy.

Essay Prompt

For the 2026 National Civics Bee®, middle school students in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades must answer the following four questions:

QUESTION

01

IDENTIFY a specific opportunity, problem, or challenge in your community. What is something in your school, neighborhood, or town that could be improved?

100 words minimum–150 words maximum

QUESTION

02

DESCRIBE the steps you would take to make this change. What will you do to make a positive impact, and why does it matter?

150 words minimum–200 words maximum

QUESTION

03

FIND support to help bring the idea to life. Think about student groups, teachers, local businesses, community organizations, city leaders, or others.

100 words minimum–150 words maximum

QUESTION

04

CONNECT your idea to the values that shaped our country. How does your idea reflect the Founding Principles and Civic Virtues of our country? Use examples from the Founding Principles and Civic Virtues to show how your idea reflects the responsibilities of citizenship.

150 words minimum–250 words maximum

Each 4-paragraph essay answer will be evaluated based on how well the students:

- Demonstrate an understanding of civics.
- Incorporate research and references to support your ideas. While formal citations are not required, you should provide enough information to show the sources of ideas and information.
- Clearly describe an idea that is innovative or new to them.
- Acknowledge and address at least one Founding Principle and one Civic Virtue.

Each essay answer will be reviewed by at least two judges, and the students with the highest scores will be invited to participate in a live competition of the National Civics Bee®, including quiz rounds and Q&A with judges about your essay.

Ideal responses:

- Address the questions asked in a thoughtful and meaningful manner.
- Use referenced facts and arguments when appropriate to support your answers.
- Organize your answers in a manner that flows logically and reads clearly.

Other ideas:

- Try reading your essay aloud to a family member. Does it sound like it flows easily? Can your audience member summarize your essay back to you in one or two sentences? (If they can't, try going back and clarifying your ideas)
- Try putting your essay down for a day or two and coming back to it and re-reading it. Do you notice anything you'd like to change or add?



HERE'S A TIP—AFTER YOU WRITE, ASK YOURSELF:

Have I answered all the questions?

- Have I provided examples where asked?
- Have I said what I wanted to say?

Is my essay well-written?

- Is it clear what I am discussing?
- Is my writing well-organized with a clear introduction, supporting details, and conclusion?

Is my writing correct?

- Have I checked for spelling errors myself, without relying on spell-check?
- Have I checked for grammar errors myself, without relying on a grammar checker?

Essay Judging Rubric

QUESTION 01

IDENTIFY a specific opportunity, problem, or challenge.

20 Total Points

Outstanding 16–20 Points	Clearly identifies and articulates a specific community opportunity, problem, or challenge with depth and insight.
Above Average 11–15 Points	Identifies a community opportunity with some depth or detail.
Average 6–10 Points	Identifies a community opportunity but with less depth or detail.
Below Average 0–5 Points	Opportunity is not clearly identified or is irrelevant.

QUESTION 02

DESCRIBE the steps you would take to make this change.

20 Total Points

Outstanding 16–20 Points	Clearly outlines thoughtful, logical, and well-sequenced steps to address the issue in a unique or innovative way.
Above Average 11–15 Points	Describes logical steps with some detail and clarity.
Average 6–10 Points	Describes steps with limited detail, missing logic or clarity in places.
Below Average 0–5 Points	Provides unclear or incomplete steps with little logical structure.

QUESTION 03

FIND support to help bring the idea to life.

20 Total Points

Outstanding 16–20 Points	Identifies meaningful civic resources, people, and groups, opposing viewpoints, and clearly connects them to the plan.
Above Average 11–15 Points	Identifies relevant civic resources, people, or groups; and explains their role in the plan.
Average 6–10 Points	Identifies some resources, people, or groups with limited explanation or relevance.
Below Average 0–5 Points	Few or no resources, people, or groups identified.

QUESTION 04

CONNECT to Founding Principles and Civic Virtues.

30 Total Points

Outstanding 23–30 Points	Clearly connects the solution to specific Founding Principles and Civic Virtues with strong reasoning.
Above Average 16–22 Points	Connects the solution to relevant principles and virtues with some explanation.
Average 8–15 Points	Makes general or limited connections to Founding Principles and Virtues.
Below Average 0–7 Points	Makes weak or no connection to Founding Principles or Civic Virtues.

General Criteria for All Questions

Responses should incorporate research and references to support student ideas. While formal citations are not required, students must provide enough information to show the sources of their ideas and information.

Research and Reference Use: 10 Total Points

Outstanding 8–10 Points	Uses well-researched information and references effectively to support the essay.
Above Average 5–7 Points	Adequate use of research with references that generally support the points.
Average 3–4 Points	Sparse use of research and references.
Below Average 0–2 Points	Minimal or no research or references used.

Helpful Definitions & Essay Organizers

To write a successful 4-paragraph essay, you must include at least one of the outlined Founding Principles and one Civic Virtue. To help you get started, we've included definitions and Essay Organizers.

I. FOUNDING PRINCIPLES

1. Natural/Inalienable Rights

Definition—Rights which belong to humans by nature and cannot be taken away. Examples are life, liberty, and property.

Consider This—Does your solution relate to injustices in your community?

Examples—This could be a project that secures or recognizes the fundamental rights of others in your community.

2. Equality

Definition—All individuals have the same claim as human beings to natural rights and treatment under the law.

Consider This—Does your idea promote equality within your community?

Examples—Initiatives that focus on various aspects of social justice, including race, gender, economic status, and more.

3. Consent of the Governed

Definition—The power of government comes from the people.

Consider This—Will your solution need to get approval from your community?

Examples—Seeking input from the local chamber of commerce to incorporate views from the business sector, engaging with neighborhood groups to gain their support.

4. Rule of Law

Definition—Government and citizens all abide by the same laws regardless of political power. Those laws must be stable and justly applied.

Consider This—Are there government processes you will need to follow?

Examples—Engaging with a local town council to amend a city ordinance or collaborating with a local parks department to modify a policy.

5. Separation of Powers

Definition—Each division of government exercises distinct powers to carry out its functions and to prevent the accumulation of power.

Consider This—If you think the government can help you, which branch should you work with?

Examples—An initiative that requires action from the mayor, legislation passed by your town council, or your idea will require you to work with a law enforcement.

6. Private Property

Definition—The natural right of all individuals to create, obtain, and control their possessions, beliefs, faculties, and opinions as well as the fruits of their labor.

Consider This—Will your solution require individuals to part with their property (like their money), or lend their property to the community (like by offering rental space)?

Examples—People will pay you or donate for a service you plan to provide.

II. CIVIC VIRTUES

1. Humility

Definition—A recognition that one's ignorance is far greater than one's knowledge. Putting others ahead of ourselves in thought, word, and deed.

Consider This—Will you need to listen to community members to find a solution?

Examples—Hold a listening session to hear from members of the community you are working with. Learn a skill or the history of the community that your solution will impact.

2. Integrity

Definition—To tell the truth, expose untruths, and keep one's promises.

Consider This—How will you make sure to follow through on the solution you commit to?

Examples—Create a realistic schedule for completing your solution. Make a public statement or message that acts as a commitment for others to hold you accountable.

3. Moderation

Definition—The avoidance of excess or extremes.

Consider This—How can you ensure your goals are realistic and achievable?

Examples—Starting with a small solution that addresses a single problem while leaving room for it to grow. Make a set of goals you think you can reach within three to six months.

4. Respect

Definition—Regard for and defending the equal rights and inherent dignity of all human beings, including oneself.

Consider This—How will your solution support individuals and work well with other people in the community?

Examples—Telling the stories of your community members with your project. Highlight how your contribution is part of a longer history of contributions by others. Be grateful for the help others give you or the knowledge they share.

5. Responsibility

Definition—Acting on good judgment about what is right or wrong, even when it is not popular. Individuals must take care of themselves, their families, and their fellow community members.

Consider This—Why do you think your solution is necessary? Why is it important that YOU are the one that works towards this solution?

Examples—Make clear how you have benefited from your community and why you wish to give back. Highlight what inspired you to act and why.



Emily Brubaker, 2024 National
Civics Bee Champion



Essay Organizers

Preparing for Your Essay

Directions: To participate in the National Civics Bee®, you will need to demonstrate your understanding and passion for civics. To get started, you may use this organizer to help plan and structure your answers effectively. Carefully read the essay prompts and the supporting questions. Record your thoughts and responses in the “My Notes” section of the organizer, allowing you to thoroughly consider each prompt before you start writing your essay.

	ESSAY PROMPTS	SUPPORTING QUESTIONS	MY NOTES
Identify Your Essay Topic	IDENTIFY a specific opportunity, problem, or challenge in your community.	What parts of your community do you care about the most? Have you noticed any issues or difficulties that people in your community face on a regular basis? What impact do you think this problem, challenge, or opportunity has on the people in your community?	
	DESCRIBE the steps you would take to make this change.	Are there any existing efforts or initiatives in your community aimed at addressing this issue? What resources or support might be needed to effectively address this issue? How do you envision your proposed solution making a positive impact on your community?	
	FIND support to help bring the idea to life.	How would these individuals or organizations contribute to the success of your solution? What role would you play in working with these partners? What impact would collaborating with these partners have on your local community?	
Prepare Your Evidence	What sources provide supporting evidence or examples for your writing and answers to the essay prompts?	How can you use this information to support your own ideas? How will you give credit to the sources you use in your essay? How can you smoothly incorporate quotes or information from your sources into your own writing?	

Thinking About Principles



For more information about Founding Principles visit: <https://billofrights.institute.org/resources/principles-and-virtues>

Directions: In order to write a successful answer, you must include at least one Founding Principle. Begin by examining these principles, along with their definitions and questions, to determine how they align with your answer. Then reflect on the relevance of each principle to your idea, and write 1–2 sentences about how it relates, or doesn’t relate to your idea. Next, assess the principles’ relevance to your topic by assigning a rating from 1 (only relates a little bit) to 5 (relates a lot) to help choose at least one principle to include in your answer. This evaluation will assist you in selecting at least one principle to effectively integrate into your essay.

PRINCIPLE	HOW DOES THIS PRINCIPLE RELATE TO YOUR IDEA?	RANKING
Consent of the Governed Definition —The power of government comes from the people. Consider This —Does your solution need approval from the community?		
Rule of Law Definition —Government and citizens all abide by the same laws regardless of political power. Those laws must be stable and justly applied. Consider This —Are your ideas fair and equally applied within the community? Do they follow the rule of law?		
Separation of Powers Definition —Each division of government exercises distinct powers to carry out its functions and to prevent the accumulation of power. Consider This —Does your solution need a branch of government to succeed? If yes, which one(s)?		
Equality Definition —All individuals have the same claim as human beings to natural rights and treatment under the law. Consider This —What role does your idea play in promoting equality within your community?		
Private Property Definition —The natural right of all individuals to create, obtain, and control their possessions, beliefs, faculties, and opinions as well as the fruits of their labor. Consider This —Did your solution require individuals to part with their property, or lend their property to the community?		

Thinking About Civic Virtues



For more information about Civic Virtues visit:
<https://billofrightsinstitute.org/resources/principles-and-virtues>

Directions: Repeat the process, but this time with Civic Virtues. To write a successful essay, you must include at least one Civic Virtue. Begin by examining these Civic Virtues along with their definitions and questions, to determine how they align with your essay answer. Then reflect on the relevance of each Civic Virtue to your idea, and write 1-2 sentences about how it relates, or doesn't relate to your idea. Next, assess the Civic Virtues' relevance to your topic by assigning a rating from 1 (only relates a little bit) to 5 (relates a lot) to help choose at least one Civic Virtue to include in your answer. This evaluation will assist you in selecting at least one Civic Virtue to effectively integrate into your answer.

VIRTUE	HOW DOES THIS VIRTUE RELATE TO YOUR IDEA?	RANKING
Humility Definition —A recognition that one's ignorance is far greater than one's knowledge. Putting others ahead of ourselves in thought, word, and deed. Consider This —Is listening to community members necessary to identify a solution?		
Integrity Definition —To tell the truth, expose untruths, and keep one's promises. Consider This —How will you follow-through on your commitment to the community?		
Moderation Definition —The avoidance of excess or extremes. Consider This —Are your goals realistic and achievable?		
Respect Definition —Regard for and defending the equal rights and inherent dignity of all human beings, including oneself. Consider This —How will you achieve effective collaboration with others in the community?		
Responsibility Definition —Acting on good judgment about what is right or wrong, even when it is not popular. Individuals must take care of themselves, their families, and their fellow community members. Consider This —What makes the work necessary? Why is it crucial for this task to be undertaken by you?		



How to Enter

Preferred Method: Online Application



**All students are encouraged
to apply online**

**Deadline: February 3, 2026 at 11:59pm
Hawaii Standard Time**



nationalcivicsbee.org

SIGN UP NOW



OR

Alternate Method: Mail-In Submission

Students without internet or computer access may apply by completing the Mail-In Application Form (see next pages) and mailing it to:

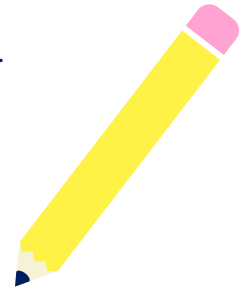
**National Civics Bee
1750 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, #27720
Washington, DC 20038**

All required information in the Mail-In Application Form must be completed.

Handwriting must be legible.

Applications must be postmarked by February 3, 2026.

Applications must be received by February 17, 2026.



**TIP: Mail applications as early as possible
to ensure they arrive by the deadline!**

Applications that are incomplete, received by email or any other means, postmarked after the deadline or received after the deadline, will not be considered.

National Civics Bee® Mail-In Application Form



INSTRUCTIONS

Students without internet or computer access may complete this form and mail it, postmarked by the entry deadline, to the following address:

National Civics Bee
1750 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, #27720
Washington, DC 20038

Entrants must provide the required information below to be considered.

First Name: _____

Last Name: _____

Home Address Line 1: _____

Home Address Line 2: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

Name of School: _____

School Type: _____ Grade: _____
(public, private, charter, etc.)

Parent/Guardian Email: _____

Parent/Guardian Phone Number: _____

How did you hear about the National Civics Bee?

Teacher Parent Other: _____

In one or two words, what topic best fits your essay:

PRIVACY POLICY – PLEASE CONFIRM

We will only use the information you provide consistent with the terms of our [Privacy Policy](#), including to identify your National Civics Bee® essay. We will inform your parent or guardian (using the contact information you provide) whether you are selected as a finalist or if we need any additional information.

I understand and will follow the Essay Round Rules. In addition, my parent or guardian has consented to my application to the National Civics Bee, and the related processing and collecting of information about and provided by me.

WHY WERE YOU UNABLE TO SUBMIT YOUR ESSAY ONLINE? CHECK ALL THAT APPLY

I had difficulties accessing the internet.

I do not have access to a computer.

Other (explain): _____

Essay Response: Mail-In Application Form

ESSAY INSTRUCTIONS

Write a (4) paragraph essay by responding to each question below. Review the [2026 Essay Application Guide](#) for tips, definitions, and resources to help write your responses.

01

IDENTIFY a specific opportunity, problem, or challenge in your community. What is something in your school, neighborhood, or town that could be improved? This could be anything from making your school more welcoming, improving local parks, supporting small businesses, or helping neighbors in need. **(100–150 words)**

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Essay Response: Mail-In Application Form



PARAGRAPH

02

DESCRIBE the steps you would take to make this change. What will you do to make a positive impact, and why does it matter? Think about realistic actions—something you or a small group could actually do. **(150–200 words)**

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Essay Response: Mail-In Application Form



PARAGRAPH

03

FIND support to help you bring your idea to life. Who could help you, and how would they contribute? Think about student groups, teachers, local businesses, community organizations, city leaders, or others. **(100–150 words)**

[illegible]

Essay Response: Mail-In Application Form



PARAGRAPH

04

CONNECT to Founding Principles and Civic Virtues. How does your idea reflect the Founding Principles and Civic Virtues of our country?
(150–250 words)

[illegible]