



2025-2026 Essay Contest Club Planning Guide

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.

Districts that would like their winner to be notified after their 3rd quarter District conference must submit a letter detailing this request to Optimist International by March 1. The District Chair should confirm the winner will not need to redeem their funds immediately. If a letter is submitted, Optimist International will not send a congratulatory letter or redemption materials to the District level winner until June.

Prizes

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

Club and District awards should be ordered directly from Shumsky for US and Caribbean Clubs and from Ansell for Canadian Clubs.

Club level – Medallion or Certificate

Clubs are allowed to give up to \$500 monetary/cash* awards 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. Please contact the Optimist International Foundation or Canadian Children's Optimist Foundation for setting up a Club scholarship.

*Disclaimer - Clubs planning to present cash or savings bond awards to student winners should first consult the association for their state or province that coordinates scholastic activities and competitions to determine if such payments would result in the recipient's forfeiture of amateur status. If a student loses their amateur status, they may be unable to compete in collegiate athletics and activities.

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

Districts choosing to increase funding for the scholarships or fund additional scholarships will need to manage those funds through other resources. Optimist International will not handle the awarding of any scholarships not funded by the Optimist International Foundations. The responsibility for record-keeping and awarding of additional funds or scholarships will be the Districts'. Districts may choose to hold the additional funds in District accounts or contribute those funds to the Optimist International Foundation in the U.S. and Caribbean or the Canadian Children's Foundation in Canada. Individual donors and Clubs will receive lifetime credit for gifts for increased or additional scholarships.

The Foundation will process requests from the Districts to have scholarship funds returned to them. Requests must be in writing and specify the type of scholarship and the amount. The Foundations will not award the scholarships or write checks to the individual scholarship recipients or their schools.

Criteria for Judges

Select three qualified judges who are not acquainted with the writers of the essays. At the Club level, the judges may be Optimist Members. At all other levels of the competition, judges must be non-Optimists (Friends of Optimists are excluded and can be used as judges). Judges should have expertise in creative writing.

Always have a back-up judge in case someone gets sick. Give the judges a copy of the rules and a membership brochure to review and introduce them to the world of Optimism.

Judging the Essays

The Club Essay Chair supplies each judge with the judging materials. In an effort to conceal the identity of each contestant, each entry will be 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.

The actual judging can be handled in either of the following ways:

All three judges gather and evaluate the essays and submit their completed judging forms to the Club Essay Chair.

or

Each judge is sent a packet with copies of the essays to evaluate. They return the essays and completed judging forms by a pre-determined date to the Club Essay Chair.

In either case, judges should never compare scores or comments on the essays being judged. If the Club Chair feels there was an oversight, contact the judge directly and discuss it for re-evaluation. Contest Chairs cannot change the judges' scores or deductions!

Getting the Contest Started in Your Community

The most common approach is to go to the local high

school and ask the English teachers to work with the students on an essay for the contest. There are several other easy ways to reach the young people in your community:

- Contact the Department of Education and get a contact name for home-schooled students.
- Contact the local private and parochial schools.
- Contact the local PTA/PTO president to distribute information to parents at a meeting.
- Contact local youth Clubs such as Boy/Girl Scouts and Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

Be sure to supply everyone contacted with a Club contact's name and phone number!

After the Club Contest

- Announce the winner to the Club and local media. See Optimist website for press releases (before and after) and other suggestions.
- Invite the winner to the next Club meeting to read their essay.
- Re-attach the cover page of the winning essay and send it to the District Chair with the following items:
 - _____ Completed District Essay Contest Entry Form (pg12)
 - _____ Proof of Birth Certificate or ID (will be required for District Winner to be awarded scholarship)
 - _____ Copy of Essay
 - _____ Entry Fee (if applicable)

All the items must be received by the District Essay Chair no later than February 28, 2026!

Do not send the Club's winning essay to Optimist International!
Sending the essay and paperwork to the wrong person could accidentally cause the essay to miss being judged at the District level.

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.)
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 contest chairperson will decide all protests in accordance with the official rules. The District Chair is the final authority and no appeals will be recognized.

Club Chair's Planning Timeline

July-August 2025

- Attend the International Convention for training and advice, if available!
- Present the program to your Club.
- Review the contest package program on the Optimist website.
- Contact schools and organizations for participation in the upcoming school year's contest. Give them time to include it in their plans!

September 2025

- Set the Club contest date — Clubs can hold their contest anytime between October 1st and early February.
- Give participating schools and organizations posters, applications and contact information so they can start to spread the word!
- Present the budget.

October 2025

- Contact the District Essay Chair and find out if there is an entry fee to submit the Club winner's essay to the District contest.
- Put up posters in areas where young people gather to publicize the contest.
- Publicize the contest in the local media.
- Choose three qualified judges who are not acquainted with the contestants.
- Order Club award medallions, certificates and any other items needed for the contest from Shumsky or Ansell's Awards (in Canada).

November 2025 - February 2026

- Have essays turned in by your deadline so you have plenty of time to have them judged.
- Conduct judging and select a first, second and third place winner.
- Submit the District Entry Form, copy of the birth certificate or passport, **and** first place-winning essay to the District Essay Chair. It must be received by **February 28, 2026**.
- Present the first, second and third-place awards at a Club meeting or special dinner and have the winners read their essays.

March 2026

- Complete the Club Chair Evaluation form in this guide and submit to Optimist International.
- You may return the non-winning essays to authors.
- Circulate a press release and photos of winners to the local media.
- Present a final report to the Club.

Instructions to Judges

The Judges Score Sheet, along with a copy of the rules, should be given to each judge.

Points

Material Organization

In this category, the interpretation of the subject, a clear presentation of the writer's concept, dedication to research and the logical organization of the supporting facts should be considered.

Maximum point award is 30 points.

Creativity

Consider originality, individuality, and imagination.

Maximum point award is 15 points.

Vocabulary and Style

The choice of words, use of descriptive phrases, clear sentence structure and illustration of the topic are considered. Use of figures of speech, similes, metaphors, and quotations are important factors.

Maximum point award is 30 points.

Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling

Consider such factors as subject and verb agreement, plurals of nouns and tense.

Maximum point award is 20 points.

Adherence to Contest Rules

The ability to follow instructions and observe rules is important. The rules detail the format for the essay.

Maximum point award is 5 points.

Total of points awarded should be compiled and placed in the indicated space on the form.

Penalties

Failure to list the official topic

The official topic must be listed at the top of title page and the top of page 1 of the essay.

Deduct 3 points for lack of the topic.

Failure to identify total number of words or doing so incorrectly

The number of words is to be indicated at the top of page 1 of the essay. The total must be accurate and in the proper place to avoid penalty points.

Deduct 5 points for indication in the wrong place.

Failure to Type Essay, Double Spaced and Single-sided

All essays are to be typed, double-spaced and single-sided. Deduct 5 points for each infraction up to a maximum of 15-point deduction.

Failure to stay within the 700-800 word limit

The word limit does not include the title, footnotes or bibliography. It applies only to the text and includes every word, regardless of length. Hyphenated words count as 1 word.

Deduct 5 points for each 25 words over or under the limit. French Essays will allow 50 words over/under for the deduction. Words are to be counted manually.

Self-Identification

Students cannot identify themselves, parents, school, community, sponsoring Optimist Club or District. "My father the mayor" is considered a violation.

Deduct 5 points or fraction of based on degree of identification made.

Selection of the Top Three Winners

1. Each judge ranks the best essays from 1 to 5. Ties in points and ranking are not allowed. Re-evaluate essays if necessary.
2. The Club Essay Chair will enter each judge's score on the Master Score Sheet.
3. The grand total of the three judges is determined for each essay. The entry having the largest grand total of points is declared the winner.
4. In case of a tie, the entry scoring the largest number of points in category 1 is declared the winner. If a tie still exists, each succeeding category is considered the tie-breaker.
5. Should a tie still exist through category 5, the tied essays will be re-evaluated by the three judges and judged a second time.

****Scores and totals are only available to the Contest Chair.**

No one is permitted to see the point totals or rankings! All scores are confidential!

Helpful Essay Scoring Guidelines

Maximum Awardable Total Points		Suggested point value breakdown
30	Personalization of Official Topic	15
	Creative Interpretation of the Official Topic	15
30	Word choice (vocabulary)	10
	Literary Devices (e.g. similes, metaphors)	10
	Quotes with citations	10
20	Subject-Verb Agreement, appropriate tense	10
	Punctuation and spelling	10
20	Organization of supporting facts AND RESEARCH	15
	Following the rules of the Essay Instructions	5

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.

Judge's Score Sheet

Optimist Essay Contest

Judge # _____ Entry Number _____

Categories to be judged	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Material Organization <i>Maximum point award 30 points</i>															
Creativity <i>Maximum award 15 points</i>															
Vocabulary and Style <i>Maximum point award 30 points</i>															
Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling <i>Maximum point award 20 points</i>															
Adherence to Contest Rules <i>Maximum point award 5 points</i>															
Total Points Awarded															
Penalties															
Failure to list official topic <i>Deduct 3 points</i>															
Failure to identify total number of words <i>Deduct 5 points</i>															
Failure to Type Essay/Double Space <i>Deduct 5 points(max 15 points)</i>															
Failure to stay within the 700-800 word limit <i>Deduct 5 points for each 25 words over/under the limit. French essays will allow 50 words over/under. Words are to be counted manually.</i>															
Self-Identification <i>Deduct 5 points or fraction based on degree of identification</i>															
Total Penalties Deducted															
Final Total <i>Total points awarded minus total penalties deducted</i>															
Ranking of top 5 essays NO TIES ALLOWED															

Signature of Judge _____ Date _____/_____/_____

Instructions for Master Score Sheet for Club and District Chairs

As Essay Chair, you will have two important responsibilities BEFORE turning over your entries to the judges:

1. Review entries for obvious violations of the rules. If non-conformity to the rules is so extreme that you feel the entry is not worthy of judging, as Chair you may disqualify it from further competition.
2. Number each title page and place that same number on each page of the essay. Next, detach the title page and keep it for your records. This will free the judges from any suspicion of prejudice or subjectivity.

OPTION:

For each essay to be judged, confirm the total number of words in the essay. Deduct penalty points per group of words. See Section VI-Penalties, #3.

Remember, the material in the text of the essay is counted, not the footnotes at the bottom of the page or end of the essay.

Example: ¹ The Book of Dreams, page 6-10, Steven Smith. This would not be counted in the word total, however in the text: "Dreams are an important part of a person's development."₁ The quotation would be counted. Words like: a, and, the, ARE counted in the word total. Hyphenated words count as one (1) word.

If the number of words is not correctly identified, note it on the Judges Scoresheet. This will cut down on some of the time it takes judges to complete their tasks.

*Ex: Essay #2 is over 800 words and within 25-word error, deduct 5 points

**Ex: Essay #3 is well under the 700 words required, 5 points x 4 groups of 25 words = 20-point deduction.

Two Additional Points to Keep in Mind:

1. In compiling scores, these should be kept in your confidence and should never be revealed, displayed or discussed.
2. In the event you have a large number of entries you may want to have a preliminary judging (separate judges) to reduce the number to a workable field. This is the decision of the Contest Chair; it is not mandatory.

Using the Master Score Sheet

Enter the points allotted to the various entries by each of the three judges on the master score sheet. After totaling the points allotted for each entry in the total column, rank the entries in the rank column. If no ties occur, you can easily determine your first, second and third-place winners.

In the case of a tie, the entry scoring the largest number of points in category 1 shall be declared the winner. If a tie still exists, each succeeding category shall be considered the tie-breaker.

Should a tie still exist through category 5, the tied essays shall be resubmitted to the judges for a second judging (no ties permitted, as before).

Remember scores are strictly confidential and should not be shared with anyone.

Example:

Essay #	Words counted correctly, within 25 words (50 if French)	Student Identified Count	Penalty?
1	Yes		No
2	No, 785*	805	Yes, 5 points
3	No, 592**	605	Yes, 20 points

Master Score Sheet for Club and District Chairs

Optimist Essay Contest

Entry Number	Judge 1	Judge 2	Judge 3	Point Total	Rank
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					

District Essay Contest Entry Form

To Be Completed by the Club Contest Chair

Include this form with the Club winner's essay, application, and send it to the District Essay Chair so it is received by February 28, 2026.

Contestant Information

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State/Country _____ Zip Code _____

Home Phone # (_____) _____ Age _____
(must be under 19 years of age as of October 1, 2025)

E-mail Address: _____ ☐ Gender _____

Statement of Originality

I have studied the Official Rules of the Optimist International Essay Contest and fully understand and agree to be bound by them. Furthermore, I have prepared my own essay with limited assistance. I have given proper credit for any non-original material used. I have not competed in any other Optimist Club Essay Contest this year. I understand that any omission of proper credit or violation of the rules on my part shall mean immediate disqualification.

Contestant's signature _____ Date ____/____/____

Instruction to Club Chair

1. Re-attach the title page to the essay before submitting to the District Essay Chair.
2. Type or print the name of the sponsoring Club on the title page.
3. Submit the essay along with this form, contestant application, copy of winner's birth certificate or passport and entry fee (if applicable) to the District Essay Chair to arrive no later than **FEBRUARY 28, 2026**.

Number of youth in Club contest _____

For Club Chair's signature

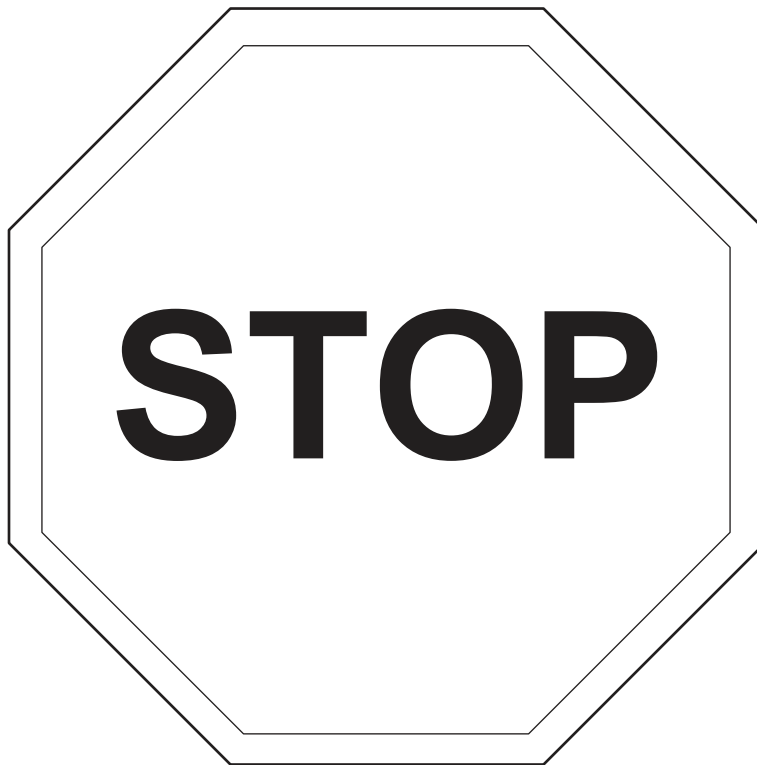
"We, the undersigned, in full compliance with the Optimist International Essay Contest rules, enter this contestant in the District Contest. We understand that this form, the application must be submitted to the Contest Chair before this contestant competes in the next level of the contest."

Optimist Club of _____ District Name _____

Club Number _____

Club President's Signature _____

Club Contest Chair's Signature _____ Printed name: _____



In order for the Club winner to be eligible to participate in the District level contest, the Club Chair must submit the following:

_____ District Essay Contest Entry Form (page 11)

- Must be signed by contestant
- Must have number of students that participated in the contest
- Must have appropriate signatures

_____ 2025-2026 Application Optimist International Essay Contest

_____ Age/ID verification by Contest Chair

- (Only District winner will need copies of ID)

_____ Printed copy of essay

_____ Entry fee, if applicable

To be received no later than February 28, 2026!