



2025-2026 Essay District Chair Planning Guide

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

Eligibility

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. The deadline for Clubs to submit their winning essay to the District Chair is **February 28, 2026.**

District entries are judged and the winner submitted to the Optimist International Programs Department no later than **April 15, 2026.** District winners will be notified by a letter from Optimist International 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 contestants in the United States and the Caribbean in US dollars and in Canadian dollars for Canadian contestants.

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

Club level - medallion

Clubs are allowed to give up to \$500 in monetary/cash* awards for the Essay contest in addition to the official medallions and/or certificates. 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 contestant 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 contestant 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 In either case, judges should never compare scores or comments on the essays being judged. If the 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!

District Contest

Judging criteria is exactly the same for the District level as it is for Club level. Once completed, the District Chair should contact the winner and get the information needed to complete the Winner's Information Form.

Foundations. The responsibility for record-keeping and awarding of additional funds or scholarships will be the Districts' responsibility.

Districts may choose to hold the additional funds in District accounts or contribute those funds to the Optimist International Foundation in the U.S. or the Canadian Children's Foundation in Canada. Individual donors and Clubs will receive lifetime credit for gifts for increased or additional scholarships.

The Foundations process requests from 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 a scholarship or write a check to an individual scholarship recipient or their school.

Judging the Essays

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.

The 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.

Judging may be handled in the following ways:

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

or

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

In either case, judges should never compare scores or comments on the essays being judged. If the 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!

District Contest

Judging criteria is exactly the same for the District level as it is for Club level. Once completed, the District Chair should contact the winner and get the information needed to complete the Winner's Information Form.

Submit To:

Optimist International Programs Department

Email: programs@optimist.org

**Forms should arrive no later
than.**

April 15, 2026!

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 in or nearest to where they reside.
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 for the current year.
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 points)
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. The official topic must be listed at the top of the page and the top of page 1 of the essay: 3 points
The official topic must be listed at the top of the page and the top of page 1 of the essay.
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 points)
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.

1. Club level – medallion or certificate
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.

District Chair's Planning Timeline

July-August 2025

- Receive an information packet from the Optimist International Programs Department.
- Set a District contest date and have it published in the District directory along with your contact information.
- Send a mailing to all incoming Club Presidents and Lieutenant Governors with information on deadlines, entry fees (if any) and encouragement to participate in the program.

October 2025

- Prepare a presentation for the First Quarter District Conference. Print copies of the new Application double-sided, and note where local clubs are to add their contact information.
- Prepare something in writing for Club Presidents to take home with your name and contact information. Train Clubs on how to conduct the contest and how to obtain extra materials if needed.
- Ask Clubs to contact you by a specific date if they plan to hold a contest. This will allow you to direct interested contestants to the appropriate Club.
- Secure three non-Optimist judges for the District level judging.

November 2025 - January 2026

- Order a District winner plaque and any certificates needed from Shumsky or Ansell's (in Canada).
- Remind Club Presidents and Lieutenant Governors in writing that the deadline of February 28 is approaching. Give them any new developments and answers to frequently asked questions.

February 2026

- Conduct an at-large contest for entries from U.S. contestants on overseas military installations, if needed.
- Receive all Club entries no later than February 28.

March 2026

- Conduct judging of essays submitted.
- Announce the winner!
- Return all entries, except first, second and third place.
- Contact the District Governor and arrange for the awards presentation and reading of the essays at the next District meeting.
- Notify all Clubs of the District winner's name and sponsoring Club.

April 2026

- Contact the first-place winner to obtain information for the Winner's Information Form. Social Security number/SIN must be given for District winners (on Winner's Information form) in order to aid in tracking of scholarship funds to colleges and universities.
- Send the District Winner's Information Form, Zone/ District Essay Contest Entry Form, copy of the birth certificate or passport and first-place essay by

April 15, 2026 to:

Optimist International
Programs Department

Email:

programs@optimist.org

Visitor Sign-In Sheet

Name: _____ Home phone: _____
Business phone: _____ Cell phone: _____
Address: _____
City: _____ State/Country: _____ Zip Code: _____
Notes: _____

Name: _____ Home phone: _____
Business phone: _____ Cell phone: _____
Address: _____
City: _____ State/Country: _____ Zip Code: _____
Notes: _____

Name: _____ Home phone: _____
Business phone: _____ Cell phone: _____
Address: _____
City: _____ State/Country: _____ Zip Code: _____
Notes: _____

Name: _____ Home phone: _____
Business phone: _____ Cell phone: _____
Address: _____
City: _____ State/Country: _____ Zip Code: _____
Notes: _____

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www.optimist.org

Instructions to Judges

This form, 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 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

Contestants 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 pts.)</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 for the deduction). 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

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.

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

Two Additional Points to Keep in Mind:

1. 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.
2. In the event you have a large number of entries you may want to have a preliminary judging (may use 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 tiebreaker.

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.

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					

2025-2026 District Essay Contest Winner's Information Form

To be Completed by the DISTRICT ESSAY CHAIR ONLY

District Name/Number _____

Student's Name (print legibly) _____

Address _____

City _____ State/Country _____ Zip Code _____

Home Telephone # (_____) _____ Age _____

Total Number of Essays in Club/District Contest _____

We certify that the above named contestant is the winner of the _____
(District Name)

District Essay Contest, judged on (date) _____.

Signed _____ District Governor

Signed _____ District Essay Chair

Phone Number (____) _____ E-mail _____

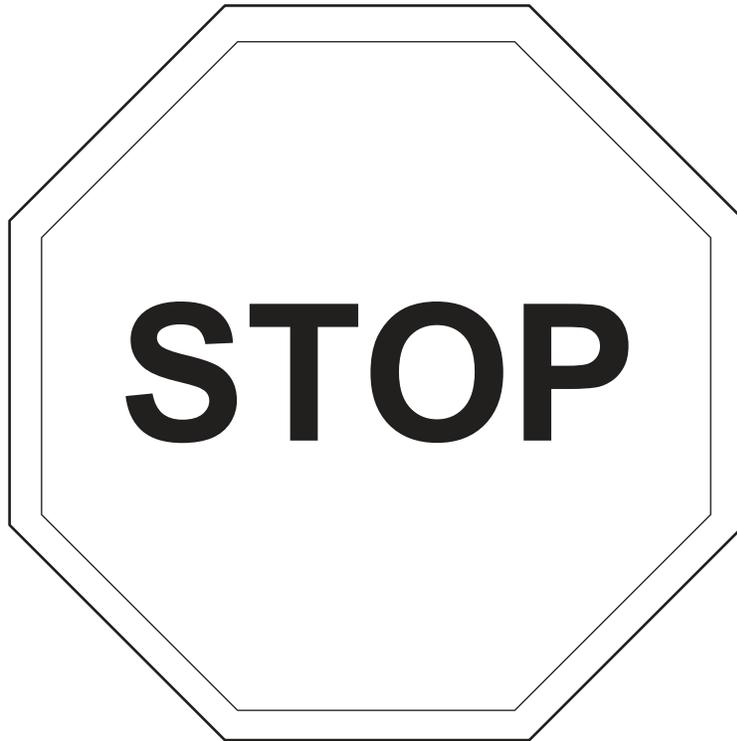
Enclosures:

- _____ Winner's Information Form
- _____ District Essay Contest Entry Form
- _____ Winner's Application Form
- _____ Copy of Birth Certificate, Passport, or ID
- _____ Copy of Winning Essay

*Without all of the information, OI will not be able to process the scholarship. PLEASE SEND ALL OF THE ABOVE INFORMATION.

Submit to: programs@optimist.org

TO ARRIVE NO LATER THAN APRIL 15, 2026!



In order for the District scholarship to be processed, District Chairs must submit the following for the winner:

_____ District Winner's Information Form

- **Must have number of contestants that participated in District contest**
- Must have District Chair and District Governor's signatures

_____ Application for 2025-2026 Optimist International Essay Contest

_____ District Essay Contest Entry Form

- Must be signed by contestant
- **Must have number of contestants that participated in this year's contest**
- Must have appropriate signatures

_____ Copy of Identification (birth certificate/passport/driver's license)

_____ Printed copy of Essay

To be received no later than April 15, 2026!