

THE KNIGHT ESSAY CONTEST: RULES, CHALLENGES, EXAMPLES, WARNINGS

Doc Rice¹, Chairman 2012-2015

Awards for the 2012/2013 Knight Essay Contest² are generous – as they should be. The National first-place winner gets \$2,000, a certificate and medal, airfare to the SAR³ Annual Congress, and hotel expenses. National runner-up receives \$1,000, with \$500 to third place.

(More to come about State scholarships and awards.)

Benefits – High school participants across the country gain knowledge of America's special place in the world. They benefit from the Knight Essay Contest in ways that influence their lifetime level of achievement, ways that can someday reward us all.

LET'S GET STARTED

First thing to do – On your computer find "Knight Essay Contest Rules" (http://www.sar.org/Youth/Knight_Essay_Rules) and print a copy. I'll hit the highlights because two eyes see better than one. But you need to printed rules, because I'll miss - or garble - something. Here's my best thoughts:

1. It's for sophomores, juniors and seniors.
2. Each contestant gets one entry - as short as 800 words, as long as 1,200.
3. Essays (on paper) must reach the chapter by December 31st reach me by January 31st.
4. The National Chairman announces finalists in April.

¹ Dr. Joe Allen Rice, Professor Emeritus of the University of Houston, had been a newspaper reporter, a columnist, a research contributor to a series awarded the Pulitzer Prize, an editor, a technical writer for banks, manufacturing and petrochemicals

² http://www.sar.org/Youth/Knight_Essay

³ Sons of the America Revolution

5. The topic is as wide as the Mississippi River – an event, person, philosophy, or ideal associated with the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, or the framing of the United States Constitution. Challenge: Narrow it down.
6. Five references required – At least three must be published books. Internet sites and encyclopedias are not published books. Warning: Violation = disqualification.
7. Keep parts separate – title page, essay, works cited, biography. Warning: student name only on title page, student data only in biography. Anywhere else = disqualification.
8. Title page – Title of the essay, student's name, address, phone and email if any. Below that – high school name, address, phone. Below that – grade level.
9. First page of essay – Title at top. Original copy, typed, double-spaced, on white bond paper. No bindings, special covers, or graphics. Warning: neatness counts.

THE KNIGHT ESSAY CONTEST

ALEXIS AND ALEXANDER: *STATE WINNERS*

Let's get on a first-name basis with the TXSSAR⁴ winners of the past two. **Alexis was a 12th-grader. Alexander was in the 11th.** What can they tell us? Alexis has a smoothly-flowing writing style. And she thinks like a writer. Her title, "Good Morning, America," sets up her first paragraph: Benjamin Franklin admires a painting of a rising, or setting, sun. "Which is it?" he is asked. He snaps, "I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting sun."

Alexis ends on a personal note: "I am able to go to sleep at night knowing that Benjamin Franklin was right about that painting. The sun was rising and it will continue to bathe America in its warmth." She brings herself into the essay!

Why doesn't Alexis win all the marbles? Her essay never quite settles on its subject. It needs a topic sentence that says more than "illuminated by the light of lofty ideals." What lofty ideals? And does she have to bring in every Founding Father?

Alexander is no writer. He titles his essay: "The Aftermath of a Battle and How it Helped Win a Revolution." That's wordy and ambiguous. Did the aftermath or battle help us win? Turns out, it's both. He drives home the importance of Saratoga. "The battle was an utter defeat for the British." Then Alexander tells us the French had been waiting to come openly to our aid. Saratoga did it! He stays right on topic.

Why isn't he a national winner? His sentences drag. "Both of these engagements were fought in an area nine miles south of. . ." Instead of: "The two battles were nine miles south of. . . ." He's a long-sentence/empty-word guy.

⁴ Texas Society, Sons of the American Revolution

He doesn't plagiarize, but his sentences are canned: ". . . did not instill confidence in the military prowess of the fledgling United States." History teachers bring on snores with such textbook English. "The British were about to enter upon a huge military blunder." More textbook English. Just say: "The British were about to commit . . ."

He gets points for quotes that show a sense of humor (always good): Burgoyne is, "a vain, silly and witty man." The general brings, "4,000 British, 3,000 Germans, 1,400 Indians, and a pleasing Mistress to cheer him along." Atta boy, Alexander! Alexis and Alexander are almost-winners. We need more like 'em.

TXSSAR KNIGHT ESSAY CONTEST

LITTLE THINGS CAN MEAN A LOT

1. **TITLE** – Writing benefits from a good title: Lonesome Dove, Gone With the wind, From Here to Eternity, Heaven Can Wait, The Great Train Robbery, The Great Escape, Star Wars. A good title keeps an essay in focus.
2. **NUMBERS** – Pound for pound (so to speak) nothing beats numbers. They don't take much space; they add precision and credibility. How many dead? Wounded? Survivors? What's the caliber? Tonnage? Distance? Temperature? Numbers pull the reader forward.
3. **PRONOUN CORRECTNESS** –Pronoun Correctness can lead writers to clumsiness of the "him-her" variety. The essay should be correct, but it need not be clumsy.
4. **TYPE FONT** – This page is in Times New Roman 14-point type, not the more usual 12. Why? TXSSAR essays will be read by aging eyes, expecting Times New Roman. And 14 is easier on the eyes of judges.
5. **STUDENT BIOGRAPHY** – This is an oddity, because it is "included but not judged." Huh! Advice: Modesty won't hurt. These can make a judge cringe.
6. **SURPRISE** – Essay judges love it when they learn some American history from the pages that pass through their hands. It's the only pay they get. That's one reason to explore new territory in the essay. An essayist should be brave!
7. **ROOM TO BREATHE** – Paragraphs need air between them. A solid block of print makes a bored reader yawn and squint.
8. **ESSAY AS THE FIRST STEP** – Ideally, the essay leads to college papers, grad school, talks to civic groups and maybe even beyond – to hard-covers. It's the foundation for works to follow. Shouldn't be a one-shot. Could be a life-changer.

9. DOCUMENTATION – The MLA Handbook⁵ and Kate Turabian⁶ have poked at each other for half a century. It's a draw. (Yuck!) So, choose either one and follow either MLA or Turabian. Here's a national winner to look at. Footnotes, on one page, Works Cited on the next page – Double-spaced throughout:

Footnotes

- ¹ James Macgregor Burns, Thomas E. Cronin, David B. Magleby, J. W. Peltason, *Government by the People* (Upper Saddle River, 1998)
² James Madison, *The Federalist*, No. 47
etc.

Works Cited

1. James Macgregor Burns, Thomas E. Cronin, David B. Magleby, J. W. Peltason, *Government by the People* (upper Saddle River, 1998)
2. James Madison, *The Federalist*, No.47
3. James Madison, *The Federalist*, No. 51
4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, 1972)
etc.

10. JUDGING CRITERIA – Accuracy, clarity, grammar, spelling, documentation, organization, on topic.
11. HINT – Benjamin Franklin gets quoted in essay after essay. He was witty and colorful, so who can blame an essay-writer for that. But, after a judge has read Dr. Franklin – one time too many – on what kind of government we'll have, it's refreshing to hear from one of his colleagues. Ben did not have a patent on witty & colorful. Contestants should remember that.
12. THE KNIGHT ESSAY CONTEST DOESN'T SIT ON A HILL BY ITSELF – Check out the Poster Contest, the History Teacher Contest, Oration, CAR Essay. Full involvement builds a chapter.

⁵ MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers

⁶ Originator and author of how to write college paper including research papers, theses and dissertations

13. CONFUSION – NSSAR⁷ & TXSSAR, MLA, Turabian, deadlines, spell checks, editing and paraphrase and bugaboos like the dreaded plagiarism ... Don't be intimidated. If you are all-snarled-up, we are here to help. (That's why we get the big bucks!)

14. LAST THING – Contestants should not stray from their home-vocabulary. In her first sentence, a winner mentions "the exulted Benjamin Franklin." Exulted? Is "exulted" even a word? Yes, sort of – though rare & odd. Does it fit here? No. She was fishing for "exalted," if she wanted to say Franklin was highly-praised. Or "exultant," if she wanted to say the ol' scamp was tickled – which is likely what she meant. Ben was a jovial old codger, famous for his wicked exultations.

Doc Rice, Texas Chairman
TXSSAR Knight Essay Contest
Deceased 3/4/2016

⁷ National Society, Sons of the American Revolution