

2026 NINTH CIRCUIT ESSAY CONTEST



Who May Enter: The 2026 Ninth Circuit Civics Contest is open to high school students residing in Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington state, the U.S. Territory of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Students in the 9th through 12th grades attending public, private, parochial and charter schools, and home-schooled students of equivalent grade status, are invited to participate. Children of federal judges, chambers staff and employees of federal court offices are not eligible to participate.

Prompt: “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”

In 2026, our nation will celebrate 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence—a document that boldly declared “all men are created equal” and are granted by their Creator the “unalienable Rights” to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. It further proclaimed that to secure these rights, governments are instituted by consent of the governed. These words not only sparked a revolution but also set the foundation for the values we still strive to uphold today.

Which of these rights sparks your interest to reflect on its meaning and impact?

The Ninth Circuit Civics Contest prompt challenges you to choose one of these enduring rights—Life, Liberty or the Pursuit of Happiness—and tell us: (i) why this right was essential in 1776, (ii) how this right impacts you, your family or your community today; and (iii) what should we do to protect or improve this right moving forward?

There is no one correct way to answer the prompt and no specific right you are expected to highlight.

Length and Format: Individual students can express their thoughts and ideas in an essay between 500 and 1,000 words. Footnotes and bibliographies are not included in the word count. Essays must be submitted in a **Word or PDF** file.

Essay Submission: Essays must be uploaded at <https://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/civicscontest>. Additional upload instructions are available via this link. Confirm that your email address is correct before you complete the process of submitting your essay. You will receive an email confirmation after you have

successfully uploaded your essay. A student who is submitting an essay is not required to submit a video. You have the option to submit an essay and a video but can only submit one of each.

Contest Duration: Entries will be accepted starting Jan. 7, 2026. **Deadline for entries is 11:59 p.m. Pacific Time, March 6, 2026.** Finalists will be announced in May and winners in June.

Judging Criteria:

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| 1. | Understanding of constitutional principles
Essay demonstrates clear understanding of the Declaration of Independence, providing legal and/or historical examples | 40 points |
| 2. | Clarity and effectiveness in expressing the theme
Essay organizes and communicates concepts and ideas clearly | 30 points |
| 3. | Grammar, spelling and composition
Essay uses correct spelling, proper grammar and sentence composition | 25 points |
| 4. | Use of footnotes, bibliography
Essay properly identifies and attributes information taken from other sources | 5 points |

Release Forms: If you are selected as one of the finalists, you will be required to submit a release form allowing the Ninth Circuit to publish your essay in print publications and/or on public websites of federal courts throughout the circuit. Contest winners will be required to provide and authorize use of photographs and/or videos of themselves in contest-related promotional materials.

Important Notice on Originality and Use of AI:

Your essay must be your own original work, written entirely by you and not generated or written with the help of artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Essays may be reviewed using AI-detection tools or other verification methods to ensure authenticity. All sources must be properly cited using a standard citation format (e.g., MLA, APA, or Chicago). Essays found to include AI-generated content or lacking appropriate citations **will be disqualified.**

Compliance with Other Contest Requirements:

Providing any false information, failing to meet the submission deadline or adhere to other contest rules, or failing to provide a requested release form may also result in disqualification.

Questions: Contact Katherine M. Rodriguez at civicscontest@ce9.uscourts.gov.

2026 NINTH CIRCUIT VIDEO CONTEST



Who May Enter: The 2026 Ninth Circuit Civics Contest is open to high school students residing in Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington state, the U.S. Territory of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Students in the 9th through 12th grades attending public, private, parochial and charter schools, and home-schooled students of equivalent grade status, are invited to participate. Children of federal judges, chambers staff and employees of federal court offices are not eligible to participate.

Prompt: “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”

In 2026, our nation will celebrate 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence—a document that boldly declared “all men are created equal” and are granted by their Creator the “unalienable Rights” to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. It further proclaimed that to secure these rights, governments are instituted by consent of the governed. These words not only sparked a revolution but also set the foundation for the values we still strive to uphold today.

Which of these rights sparks your interest to reflect on its meaning and impact?

The Ninth Circuit Civics Contest prompt challenges you to choose one of these enduring rights—Life, Liberty or the Pursuit of Happiness—and tell us: (i) why this right was essential in 1776, (ii) how this right impacts you, your family or your community today; and (iii) what should we do to protect or improve this right moving forward?

There is no one correct way to answer the prompt and no specific right you are expected to highlight.

Length and Format: Individual students, or teams of up to three students, can produce a 3-5 minute video (not including end credits). Submit as MOV, MPEG4, MPEG2 or WMV file. Resolutions of 720x486 pixels to 1920x1080 pixels are acceptable. Files may not exceed 1GB. Videos should be compressed using the H.264 codec.

Video Submission: Videos must be uploaded at <http://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/civicscontest>. Additional upload instructions are available via this link. If entering as a team, include contact information for all team members. Confirm that your email address(es) is correct before you complete the process of

submitting your video. You will receive an email confirmation after you have successfully uploaded your video. A student submitting a video is not required to submit an essay. You have the option to submit a video and an essay but can only submit one of each.

Contest Duration: Entries will be accepted starting Jan. 7, 2026. **Deadline for entries is 11:59 p.m. Pacific Time, March 6, 2026.** Finalists will be announced in May and winners in June.

Judging: Judging will be based on the following criteria.

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| 1. | Understanding of constitutional principles
Video demonstrates clear understanding of the Declaration of Independence, providing legal and/or historical examples | 30 points |
| 2. | Video exhibits originality and creativity,
<i>in a manner connected to the theme</i> | 25 points |
| 3. | Video engages the viewer on emotional/subjective level,
<i>in a manner connected to the theme</i> | 25 points |
| 4. | Video displays good production values
Audio/video quality and editing | 10 points |
| 5. | Respects copyright rules or demonstrates creativity in use of the student or team's own artistic and creative abilities
Properly credits content resources | 10 points |

Release Forms: If you are selected as one of the finalists, you will be required to submit a release form allowing the Ninth Circuit to display your video at public events or public websites of federal courts throughout the circuit. Contest winners will be required to provide and authorize use of photographs and/or videos of themselves in contest-related promotional materials.

Important Notice on Originality and Use of AI:

Your video must be your own original work, produced entirely by you and not generated or produced with the help of artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Videos may be reviewed using AI-detection tools or other verification methods to ensure authenticity. All sources must be properly cited using a standard citation format (e.g., MLA, APA, or Chicago). Videos found to include AI-generated content or lacking appropriate citations **will be disqualified**.

Compliance with Other Contest Requirements:

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Questions: Contact Katherine M. Rodriguez at civicscontest@ce9.uscourts.gov.