

Past Achievement Awards Topics

2011 Topic A: On-Line Presence

Forming an on-line presence is now a project begun by the parents of children. Many will post to a daily blog. Most of these children will grow up to maintain their own social networking site like Facebook. All will communicate with others using this on-line presence. The effect of having this information available to many is still being measured.

We do know that many employers have begun checking this on-line presence before hiring. And we know that once published to the internet the information is difficult (if not impossible) to eliminate.

Write a letter to a younger student offering your insight into the advantages and drawbacks of having and of maintaining an on-line presence. Support your advice with specific details from your own experience, observations, and current events.

2011 Topic B: The Lens of a Book

You have been asked to write a personal essay for the book review section of your local newspaper. The request carries with it these additional comments and guidelines: Books can give us a lens for viewing and understanding the world around us, and sometimes -- if we're lucky -- we find a book that offers us what we find to be a perfect lens on the world.

Choose a novel that offers you a way of understanding the world. How did you find the book, and what was your experience while reading it? Explain how that book merges with your own experience and understanding of the world around you.

2010 Topic A: Social Issue

Choose a social issue that concerns you (such as poverty, inequality in the workplace, discrimination, disease, hunger, etc.). Then, choose an audience (peers, politicians, board of education, etc.), and bring your passion, problem-solving skills, and creativity to the discussion of steps that can be taken on a personal, regional, or global level to address this concern.

2010 Topic B: Appreciation

Sometimes the best way to appreciate something is to compare it to something else. This is especially true when appreciating a place or an event.

Write a personal essay in which you bring to life two places or events. Through comparison (explicit or implicit), consider how one helped you understand the other, gave new meaning to both, and/or led you to a separate discovery or understanding (about yourself, others, the world, etc.).

2009 Topic A: Persona

We have often heard of putting on "another hat" or "wearing someone else's shoes." In literature this is known as taking on a persona, a character assumed by an author in a written work. Choose an article of clothing that will help you to assume a persona, put it on, and tell a story from this new point of view.

2009 Topic B: Empire Decline

Some media forums imply that the United States is declining in stature on the world stage. Write an editorial for your school newspaper arguing either for or against this position.

2008 Topic A: The Moral of the Story

In some cultures, orators fictionalized tales in order to teach a moral or to guide children and adolescents in their behavior. In other traditions, authors were restricted to using only certain characters or objects.

Continue this tradition of storytelling by creating a short story that teaches a lesson. Your tale must contain the following elements: a liquid, a vehicle, a well-known person, and a set of something. Your piece will be published in a high school literary magazine that is circulated throughout your high school and community.

2008 Topic B: Elections – The World of Politics and Dirty Campaigning

Political ads are created to inform the voting public. Candidates and political parties invest considerable amounts of time and money to promote their platforms. Political ads, along with campaign literature mailed to residents and computer-automated phone calls to households, contain information concerning jobs, health care, terrorism, and the war, to name a few of the controversial issues that concern voters. While some ads address the issues with facts and evidence, others may attack the candidate on a personal level.

In a letter to the editor, express your feelings and thoughts concerning political advertisements, including recommendations you would offer candidates as they construct their commercials and print media. Use examples from national, state, or local elections to support your position.

2007 Topic A—Students Who Don't Fit In

Oftentimes, in school, there are students who do not “fit in,” who may be shunned and have a difficult time. People sometimes exclude others because of characteristics, such as weight, color of skin, or other physical differences. Additionally, individuals may be ridiculed for other reasons. These might include poor academic ability, accents, athletic ability, economic limitations, speech impediments, or the clothes they wear.

In an address to the student body, explain this problem and provide a proposal for how your school could deal with it, who would be part of the solution, and how you would lead the school community in this initiative. Include your own experiences, observations, and background knowledge.

2007 Topic B—Fictional Character as Teacher—Although fictional characters may not have the title of teacher, they may teach through actions, reactions, attitudes, insights, prejudices, abilities, or disabilities. They might be “good” teachers or we might learn from them because they teach us what *not* to do.

Discuss one such literary character and the lesson(s) he or she teaches in an application essay for your school parent organization's annual scholarship. Discuss why the lesson the character teaches is important to you, how this character's actions or attitudes address a problem in our world today, and how you can apply what was learned by the character to your life and society.

2006 Topic A—Senioritis—When the senior year arrives, some students just want to finish high school, look for the perfect job or write a successful college application, and relax before they assume adult responsibilities, but this behavior can prove harmful to your future.

"Also known as senioritis, taking it easy the senior year may seem like a nice break but is likely to do more harm than good. According to recent reports, incomplete high school preparation can contribute to academic problems in college and mediocre future work habits. More than one quarter of the freshmen at 4-year colleges and nearly half of those at 2-year colleges do not even make it to their sophomore year."

"What to do about Senioritis: Make Your Senior Year Count." College Board. 2001. "Everything that leads up to the final year helps contribute to its success (or failure) and everything that follows, either in education or work, should lead out of it. As such, the senior year should be the culmination of primary and secondary education, with clearly articulated high standards for leaving school, for which students should have been preparing for four or more years. The senior year also should be the embarkation point that launches the well-prepared student toward success in postsecondary education or the evermore-complex workplaces of the new economy." *Raising Our Sights: No High School Senior Left Behind*. National Commission on the High School Senior Year.

Imagine that your principal has invited all juniors to write persuasive letters recommending practical solutions to reducing senioritis in your high school. Write your persuasive letter to the principal explaining what one solution is, why you believe it will be successful, how the school can best implement it, and how the school can evaluate its success after implementation. Support your suggestion based on your own experience, observations, and background knowledge. You'll want your letter to be fluent and integrated, not just one paragraph responses for the what, why, and how's.

2006 Topic B—PUTTING VIRTUES INTO PRACTICE Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of a day when we would be judged by the content of our character rather than the color of our skin. He also dreamed of a day when social justice and peace would prevail. Rosa Parks stood up and sat down for equality and justice, putting her virtues, such as assertiveness and determination, into practice. To make King's dream a reality and to walk in the footsteps of Parks, we need to put into practice the virtues that shape our character.

Chose one virtue important to you and write an article about how you can put it into practice within your community. You should write your article for the editor of your local newspaper or your school newspaper. Remember, virtues are abstractions that you are making concrete through your specific suggestions and experiences.

What are some possible virtues you could write about? Linda Kavelin-Popov (*The Virtues Project Educator's Guide: Simple Ways to Create a Culture of Character*) lists the following virtues among many: generosity, perseverance, respect, and trustworthiness.

2005 Topic A—CELL PHONES

Advanced technology has changed the way that people communicate on a daily basis. Not only is the public bombarded with continuous advertisements for the best wireless service, but the American public is purchasing and using cell phones at the highest rate ever. Schools are finding it necessary to set policies regarding cell phone use during school hours because of the disruption that is caused by student use of cell phones.

Write a letter to your school administrator(s) arguing for or against the need for students to have cell phones in school. Support your position with specific details based on your own experience and observations.

2005 Topic B—TEEN OBESITY

In 2004, articles in newspapers and magazines and on the Internet reported that obesity is the second leading cause of preventable death in the United States. 300,000 deaths a year can be traced to the obesity epidemic. Yearly economic costs are high: \$11.3 billion is spent on obesity related health problems (type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, gall bladder disease, some cancers); \$22.2 billion is spent on heart disease traced to obesity. Americans spend \$33 billion a year on weight-reduction products. One in three Americans between ages 20 and 79 and one in five youth between ages 6 and 17 is overweight or obese. Seventy percent of obese teens will become obese adults. The major causes of teen obesity are unhealthy eating and sedentary activities.

Write an editorial for your school newspaper discussing the obesity problem and what your peers and/or school could do to combat teen obesity. Support your position with specific details from your own experience, observations, and background knowledge.

2004 Topic A—Music Off the Internet

The music industry's trade group, the Recording Industry Association of America, has filed 261 lawsuits against people it accuses of illegally downloading, recording, and distributing music online. The RIAA blames lagging CD sales on the downloading of music. Yet, in a Gallup poll, 83 percent of teenagers polled said it was morally acceptable to download music from the Internet for free.

Write an editorial for *Rolling Stone*, *Vibe*, *Country Music* or any other magazine catering to the popular music industry stating your position about the ethics of downloading and sharing music off the Internet. Provide specific reasons that support your position from your own background knowledge, experiences, and observations.

2004 Topic B—Integration and Educational Opportunity

2004 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. the Board of Education* (Little Rock, Arkansas) in which the segregation of races in public schools was found unconstitutional. The Court ruled that instead of separate schools for students of different races, schools should be integrated and all students should receive the same educational opportunity.

Your school has designated a day in March to commemorate this historic decision. In a speech you will deliver to students and teachers during a school assembly on this occasion, discuss the importance of educational equality in creating a unified, secure, and just society. Has the promise of the Supreme Court decision been fulfilled? Do students from different social classes, genders, races, and ethnic or religious backgrounds have equal educational opportunities? Support your position with specific details from your own experience, observations, and/or current events.

2003 Topic A—Coping with Teenage Stress

Teenagers today face many pressures coming from adults, peers, school, and work. These pressures can be overwhelming. Yet in many communities, services to help young people cope with these pressures (such as crisis-line counseling, online intervention programs, peer helpers, open-door counseling) are limited or nonexistent.

Prepare a speech that you will present to leaders in your community to convince them of the need to establish or increase services to help teenagers who are experiencing stressful situations. In your speech, describe how these services could provide alternative ways for teens to cope with stress.

2003 Topic B—Books vs. Films

The written word has always been important in education; however, with a more technologically advanced society, visual literacy has become more widespread. Viewing a film in many instances has replaced reading books. Yet one of the major criticisms of viewing a film based on a book is that too often the fine point of detail, which can make a book come alive, is left out of the movie.

Write to a friend about an exciting piece of literature you have read and viewed as a film. Using your experience in both reading text and viewing films, tell your friend which medium you prefer and why by focusing on a specific piece of literature.

2002 Topic A—Lyrical Content of Popular Music

Your local newspaper ran an article criticizing the lyrics of popular music. Yet the lyrics of popular music offer many images which reflect positive perspectives of the human potential. In his song "Living for the City," Stevie Wonder wrote of the determination of a poor family with these inspiring words, "her clothes are old but never are they dirty."

Identify a theme from one or more of today's popular music lyrics in which you find inspiring images of human behavior. Write a guest editorial for your local newspaper explaining how these images reflect thoughts, values, and acts that you find admirable.

2002 Topic B—Lessons Not Learned in the High School Classroom

In his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum makes the case that the important lessons of life were shaped in him in his kindergarten class. However, contrary to that notion, many of us can cite times when we learned equally important lessons from experiences outside the regular classroom.

Assume you have received the Student-of-the-Month Award from a local community group. While you are very proud of your school success, you also want the community leaders to know that you have learned valuable lessons outside the classroom. Write your acceptance speech in which you describe one of those lessons and explain what you learned and what it has meant to you.

2001 Topic A—Qualities of a Hero/Heroine

In his book, *American Heroes: Myth and Reality*, historian Marshall Fishwick writes, "Our legends are less apt to exalt wisdom or subtlety than brawn and buffoonery. Believing they can do anything once they set their minds to it, our idols don't like fences." As times change, so do our ideas of heroes. In times of crisis, we look for those who have the strength and character to lead us. At other times, we look for those who embody different qualities. The new millennium might require a re-examination of the qualities of character, personality, strength, or intellect a hero or heroine should have.

Assume you have been invited as a guest editor to submit an article about "Heroes/Heroines of the New Millennium" to your school's newspaper or Web page. Write the article in which you present those qualities that, in your opinion, define a hero or heroine. Use your reading, own experience, and observations of others as your support.

2001 Topic B—Teen Pressures/Stress

Today's teenagers have to make difficult choices. They have to choose among school, work, homework, extracurricular activities, social life, and home life. They have to decide how to balance their activities and responsibilities. Often having to make choices can be quite stressful. Yet many teens know how to deal with stress.

Imagine that you have been invited by the school board to be part of a team chosen to help teens cope with stress and pressure. Write a letter to the group explaining how you balance the stress and pressures in your life.