



THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR MUSEUM

A New Birth of Freedom Essay Contest Topics

All submissions are due 11/2/26 — Winners will be contacted on 11/23/26

This essay contest is open to all Virginia Students.

High School - Grades 9-12

- Abraham Lincoln intentionally connected the American Civil War with the American Revolutionary War in his Gettysburg Address. He reiterated that the United States was conceived in liberty and that all men are created equal. To him, the Civil War was “a new birth of freedom.” What did liberty, equality, and freedom mean to the revolutionary generation versus the Civil War generation?
 - What were Americans’ thoughts on slavery at the time of our nation’s founding versus the Civil War?
 - We encourage you to consider the experience of all Americans.

1000 words maximum - Plagiarized or AI-generated content will be disqualified

All submissions must be in the form of a PDF and directed to Wesley York at wyork@acwm.org

All submissions must include the name, age, & grade level of the student, along with a parent/guardian’s email and phone number.

Middle School - Grades 6-8

- Freedom and liberty are two words we often hear. We tend to use these words a lot, but what do they really mean?
 - What did freedom and liberty mean to Americans in the Civil War era?
 - What do freedom and liberty mean to Americans today?
 - We encourage you to consider the experience of all Americans.

500 words maximum - Plagiarized or AI-generated content will be disqualified

All submissions must be in the form of a PDF and should be directed to Wesley York at wyork@acwm.org

All submissions must include the name, age, & grade level of the student, along with a parent/guardian’s email and phone number.

Elementary - Grades 3-5

- Choose an important person from the American Civil War and explain their impact on American history.
 - Why should we still learn about this person today?
 - We encourage you to consider the experience of all Americans.

10 sentence maximum - Plagiarized or AI-generated content will be disqualified

All submissions must be in the form of a PDF and should be directed to Wesley York at wyork@acwm.org

All submissions must include the name, age, & grade level of the student, along with a parent/guardian’s email and phone number.



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Awards

- Awards
 - 1st Place - \$100 and a Family Membership to the American Civil War Museum
 - 2nd Place - \$50 and four tickets for admission to the American Civil War Museum
 - 3rd Place - Four tickets for admission to the American Civil War Museum
 - Certificates for all winners
 - Winners will be determined by a panel of judges that include educators at the American Civil War Museum and the Teacher Advisory Council. Each submission will be scored according to the accompanying rubric.
 - After the winners have been notified, winners will have until November 23rd to pick up their award from the museum at Tredegar. If the student is not able to do so, the award will be mailed.

Timeline

- 9/1/26 - Submissions are open.
- 11/2/26 - Submissions due; **any submissions past midnight on that day will be disregarded.**
- 11/16/26 - Winners will be contacted following the review process.
- 11/23/26 - Winners will be announced.



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Essay Rubric for Middle/High School

Thesis/Topic	
Students should respond to the prompt, rather than restating or rephrasing it. The thesis should be historically defensible and clearly identifiable.	0 Points - Does not address or simply restates the prompt.
	1 Point - Does not address all of the prompt, is confusing or unfocused, or lacks historical understanding.
	2 Points - Addresses the prompt, is clear and well organized, but demonstrates only adequate historical understanding.
	3 Points - Addresses all parts of the prompt, is clearly stated, focused, and demonstrates strong historical understanding.
Context/Evidence	
Students should describe a broader historical context relevant to the prompt. Students should relate the topic to broader historical events, developments, or processes that occur before, during, or continue after the time frame of the question.	0 Points - Provides no historical evidence or understanding of American history.
	1 Point - Provides minimal historical evidence, is vague, or inaccurate, or demonstrates weak understanding of American history.
	2 Points - Provides adequate historical evidence, may be general or imprecise, or demonstrates adequate understanding of American history.
	3 Points - Provides thorough historical evidence, is in depth and specific, and demonstrates clear understanding of American history.



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Analysis/Reasoning

- Students should use historical reasoning to frame or structure an argument that addresses the prompt using historical evidence to corroborate their argument.

0 Points - Does not explain the relationship between historical evidence. Gives no support to the overall argument.

1 Point - Achieves adequate explanation of relationships between historical evidence. Gives some support to the overall argument.

2 Points - Achieves substantial explanation of relationships between historical evidence. Provides strong support to the overall argument.

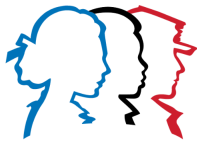
Writing

- Student's writing should be clear, organized, grammatically correct and spelled correctly. **Absolutely no plagiarism or usage of AI will be accepted. And evidence of plagiarism or AI usage will result in disqualification from the essay contest.**

0 Points - Lacks organization, frequent spelling or grammar errors, or inconsistent and erratic writing conventions.

1 Point - Adequate organization and structure, some spelling or grammar errors.

2 Points - Clear organization, few spelling or grammatical errors.



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Rubric for Elementary School

Topic	
The topic sentence is clear and easily understood.	0 points
	1 point
	2 points
Creativity	
The choice of topic is creative and original.	0 points
	1 point
	2 points
Impact	
The student effectively states the impact their historical figure had on the Civil War and American history.	0 points
	1 point
	2 points
Legacy	
Students effectively illustrate why Americans should still learn about their historical figure today.	0 points
	1 point
	2 points
Spelling/Grammar	
Students have few spelling or grammar errors.	0 points
	1 point
	2 points