

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., ESSAY AND POSTER CONTEST

THEME FOR 2025-2026:

“WHATEVER AFFECTS ONE DIRECTLY, AFFECTS ALL INDIRECTLY.” MLK, JR

The St. Johns Education Association is pleased to present the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. essay and poster contest in collaboration with the Dr. Martin Luther King Celebration Committee of St. Johns County, to celebrate the life and works of this American hero.



Essays and posters are due on **January 28th, by 5:00pm** to the SJEA office:
1260 N. Ponce De Leon Blvd., Suite F, St. Augustine, 32084.
Late essays and posters will not be accepted.

- Essay and poster judging will take place the first week of February. SJEA and the MLK Celebration Committee will choose three essay finalists in each grade category and three poster finalists in each grade category.
- SJEA will notify all contest winners through their submitting teacher by February 12th.
- We will be hosting our annual awards ceremony in the St. Augustine High School auditorium on February 24, 2026.

Essay Contest Eligibility

There are three categories for essay entries:
Grades 4-5, 6-8, and 9-12

Essay Criteria

- **A cover sheet** must include the name of the participant, complete home address, school, grade, teacher, and telephone number. Please also include the word count on your cover sheet.
- The essay must be **typed or handwritten in ink** by the student (exception: students with special accommodations).
- Length of Essay:
Grades 4 – 5: 200 - 400 words with bibliography (if applicable)
Grades 6 – 8: 400 - 600 words with bibliography (if applicable)
Grades 9 – 12: 600 - 800 words with bibliography (if applicable)
- Writing should **focus on the contest theme**, follow a clear and logical organization, and demonstrate appropriate development of ideas and command of the language for the student's grade level.
- **The essay must be the student's original work.** This is not a biography of Dr. Martin Luther King; the writing MUST reflect the contest theme or it will not be judged.

Teacher Submission Guidelines Essay Contest

- Teachers, to ensure fair and manageable judging, please pre-select your strongest essays before submitting them to SJEA.
 - **Grades 4-5:** Submit up to three top essays per class.
 - **Grades 6-8 and 9-12:** Submit up to three top essays per teacher.
- Please send your selected essays to the SJEA office (address above) by Wednesday, **January 28, 2026.**

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Poster Contest Eligibility

There are three categories for poster entries:

Grades K-5, 6-8, and 9-12

Poster Criteria

- All poster entries must be the **student's original work** – created directly and personally by the student, not copied or imitated.
- Posters must not exceed **16 inches x 20 inches**.
- Acceptable mediums:
 - Grades K-5: painting, drawing, printmaking, mixed media, or photography (using original photos).
 - Grades 6-8 and 9-12: painting, drawing, printmaking, mixed media (using original materials), photography (using original photos), or digital art (using original photos).
- Please do not attach lights or 3-D decorations to posters
- All entries should be able to provide a digital copy if requested.
- Each poster must include the student's full name, grade, teacher, and school clearly labeled on the back.

School Submission Guidelines

- To ensure fair and manageable judging, posters should first be judged at the school level.
- Each participating school may submit up to four semifinalist posters per category (Grades K-5, 6-8, 9-12).
- Please submit semifinalist posters to the SJEA office (address above) by Wednesday, **January 28, 2026**.

Individual Essay and Poster Submissions

- If a student wishes to participate but their teacher or class is not participating, the student may submit an individual entry directly to SJEA.
 - The entry must meet all listed criteria.
 - Students should indicate on the entry that they are submitting independently.
 - Parents or guardians may assist with submission, but the entry must be entirely the student's original work.

Contest Awards

- Each semi-finalist will receive a certificate at the awards ceremony.
- SJEA and the MLK Celebration Committee will award overall winners for first, second, and third place. First, second, and third-place winners in each contest category will receive Barnes & Noble gift cards.
- Our annual awards ceremony is scheduled for February 24, 2026, in the St. Augustine High School auditorium.

Questions? Contest Contacts:

Kristy Brown, SJEA 2nd Vice President (kristy.brown@stjohns.k12.fl.us)
or Marty Westall, SJEA 1st Vice President (martin.westall@stjohns.k12.fl.us)

MLK Essay Contest Rubric - Grades 4-5

Student Name: _____ School: _____ Grade: _____

Word Count Range: 200-400 words

Criteria	Excellent (4)	Proficient (3)	Developing (2)	Beginning (1)	Score
Theme Connection	Essay clearly and creatively reflects the MLK theme throughout; demonstrates deep understanding	Essay reflects the MLK theme well; shows good understanding	Essay somewhat reflects the theme; understanding is present but limited	Essay barely connects to theme or lacks clear theme connection	____/4
Focus & Organization	Writing is highly focused with clear beginning, middle, and end; logical flow throughout	Writing is focused with good organization; mostly logical progression	Writing has some focus; organization is apparent but may have gaps	Writing lacks focus; organization is unclear or confusing	____/4
Supporting Ideas	Ideas are well-developed with strong, relevant details; excellent use of examples	Ideas are developed with good supporting details; relevant examples used	Ideas are somewhat developed; some supporting details present	Ideas lack development; few or irrelevant supporting details	____/4
Language Use	Demonstrates mature command of language for grade level; varied sentence structure; engaging voice	Shows good command of language; some sentence variety; clear voice	Shows adequate language use; limited sentence variety; voice emerging	Shows basic language use; simple sentences; voice unclear	____/4
Mechanics & Presentation	Excellent grammar, spelling, punctuation; proper format with complete cover sheet	Good mechanics with minor errors; proper format and cover sheet	Some mechanical errors that don't impede understanding; cover sheet complete	Frequent mechanical errors; missing cover sheet elements	____/4
Originality	Clearly original student work; unique perspective and creative thinking evident	Original student work with good personal insights	Shows student's own work with some original thinking	Questionable originality; limited personal voice	____/4

Total Score: ____/24

Comments:

MLK Essay Contest Rubric - Grades 6-8

Student Name: _____ School: _____ Grade: _____

Word Count Range: 400-600 words

Criteria	Excellent (4)	Proficient (3)	Developing (2)	Beginning (1)	Score
Theme Connection	Essay powerfully reflects the MLK theme with sophisticated analysis; demonstrates comprehensive understanding	Essay clearly reflects the MLK theme with good analysis; shows solid understanding	Essay reflects the theme adequately; analysis is present but surface-level	Essay weakly connects to theme; minimal analysis or understanding	____/4
Focus & Organization	Highly focused with sophisticated organizational structure; seamless transitions; compelling introduction and conclusion	Well-focused with clear organization; good transitions; strong introduction and conclusion	Generally focused with adequate organization; some transitions; basic introduction and conclusion	Lacks focus; weak organization; unclear or missing introduction/conclusion	____/4
Supporting Ideas & Development	Ideas are thoroughly developed with compelling, relevant evidence; sophisticated use of examples and details	Ideas are well-developed with strong supporting evidence; good use of examples	Ideas are adequately developed; some supporting evidence and examples present	Ideas lack sufficient development; weak or irrelevant supporting evidence	____/4
Language Use & Style	Demonstrates mature, sophisticated command of language; varied and complex sentence structure; engaging, distinctive voice	Shows strong command of language; good sentence variety; clear, engaging voice	Shows adequate language use; some sentence variety; voice is developing	Shows basic language use; simple sentence structure; weak voice	____/4
Mechanics & Presentation	Excellent grammar, spelling, punctuation; proper format with complete cover sheet and bibliography (if applicable)	Good mechanics with minor errors; proper format, cover sheet, and bibliography	Some mechanical errors; mostly proper format and required elements	Frequent mechanical errors; missing required format elements	____/4
Originality & Critical Thinking	Clearly original work with sophisticated critical thinking; unique insights and creative analysis	Original work with good critical thinking; solid personal insights	Shows original thinking with some analysis; developing personal perspective	Limited originality; minimal critical thinking or personal insight	____/4

Total Score: ____/24

Comments:

MLK Essay Contest Rubric - Grades 9-12

Student Name: _____ School: _____ Grade: _____

Word Count Range: 600-800 words

Criteria	Excellent (4)	Proficient (3)	Developing (2)	Beginning (1)	Score
Theme Connection & Analysis	Essay demonstrates sophisticated, nuanced understanding of MLK theme; provides insightful analysis with multiple perspectives	Essay shows strong understanding of MLK theme; provides solid analysis with clear perspective	Essay shows adequate understanding of theme; provides basic analysis	Essay shows minimal understanding of theme; lacks meaningful analysis	____/4
Focus & Organization	Exceptionally well-organized with sophisticated structure; seamless flow; compelling introduction, body, and conclusion	Well-organized with clear structure; good flow; strong introduction, body, and conclusion	Generally organized with adequate structure; some flow issues; basic introduction, body, and conclusion	Poorly organized; unclear structure; weak or missing introduction/conclusion	____/4
Supporting Ideas & Evidence	Ideas are exceptionally well-developed with compelling, relevant evidence; sophisticated use of research and examples	Ideas are well-developed with strong supporting evidence; good use of research and examples	Ideas are adequately developed with some supporting evidence; basic use of research	Ideas lack development; insufficient or weak supporting evidence	____/4
Language Use & Style	Demonstrates sophisticated command of language; complex, varied sentence structure; distinctive, engaging voice; appropriate tone	Shows strong command of language; varied sentence structure; clear, engaging voice; appropriate tone	Shows adequate language use; some sentence variety; developing voice; mostly appropriate tone	Shows basic language use; simple sentences; weak voice; inappropriate tone	____/4
Mechanics & Presentation	Excellent grammar, spelling, punctuation; proper MLA/APA format; complete cover sheet and bibliography (if applicable)	Good mechanics with minor errors; proper format; complete cover sheet and bibliography	Some mechanical errors; mostly proper format; required elements present	Frequent mechanical errors; improper format; missing required elements	____/4
Originality & Critical Thinking	Demonstrates exceptional originality and sophisticated critical thinking; unique insights and innovative analysis	Shows strong originality and good critical thinking; solid insights and analysis	Shows adequate originality with developing critical thinking; some personal insights	Limited originality; minimal critical thinking; lacks personal perspective	____/4

Total Score: ____/24

Comments:

MLK Poster Contest Rubric - All Grades (K-12)

Student Name: _____ School: _____ Grade: _____

Criteria	Excellent (4)	Proficient (3)	Developing (2)	Beginning (1)	Score
Theme Connection	Poster powerfully and creatively reflects the MLK theme; clear, meaningful message about Dr. King	Poster clearly reflects the MLK theme; good connection to Dr. King's life/message	Poster adequately reflects the theme; some connection to Dr. King evident	Poster weakly connects to theme; minimal reference to Dr. King	____/4
Visual Impact & Composition	Outstanding visual impact; excellent composition with strong focal point; highly engaging and eye-catching	Strong visual impact; good composition with clear focal point; engaging design	Adequate visual impact; basic composition; somewhat engaging	Weak visual impact; poor composition; not engaging	____/4
Artistic Skill & Technique	Demonstrates excellent artistic skill appropriate for grade level; masterful use of chosen medium	Shows strong artistic skill for grade level; good use of chosen medium	Shows adequate artistic skill; basic use of medium	Shows limited artistic skill; poor use of medium	____/4
Creativity & Originality	Highly creative and original work; unique interpretation; innovative approach	Creative and original work; good personal interpretation; some innovation	Shows creativity and originality; developing personal interpretation	Limited creativity; minimal originality; lacks personal interpretation	____/4
Use of Color & Design Elements	Excellent use of color, balance, and design principles; creates strong visual harmony	Good use of color and design elements; creates visual appeal	Adequate use of color and design; some visual appeal	Poor use of color and design; lacks visual appeal	____/4
Technical Requirements	Meets all size requirements (16" x 20" max); uses approved medium; includes all required information on back	Meets size and medium requirements; includes most required information	Meets most technical requirements; minor omissions	Does not meet several technical requirements	____/4

Total Score: ____/24

Grade Level Considerations:

- **K-5:** Focus more on creativity, effort, and theme connection; be flexible with technical execution
- **6-12:** Higher expectations for artistic skill, originality, and technical proficiency

Comments:

Additional Judging Notes:

For Essays:

- Verify word count is within specified range
- Ensure cover sheet is complete with all required information
- Confirm essay is original student work (not a biography of MLK)
- Check for bibliography if sources were used

For Posters:

- Verify size does not exceed 16" x 20"
- Confirm medium is approved (no 3-D elements for elementary)
- Check that student information is on the back
- Ensure work is original (especially for MS/HS entries)
- Verify digital copy availability for MS/HS if needed

Disqualification Criteria:

- Does not reflect the MLK theme
- Exceeds word count limits (essays)
- Exceeds size limits (posters)
- Not original student work
- Missing required cover sheet or student information