

The Henry Pestka Art & Poetry Contest

2025-2026: Interwoven Histories For Grades 6-12

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Henry Pestka (1919-2013) was born in Ciechanów (Cheh-ha-nouf), Poland. In 1940, at the age of 21, Henry was first sent to Aushchwitz Birkenau, and then on to other camps. While interned in Germany in 1944, Henry escaped with two other prisoners, and hid in a field, near death, until they were found by the Free French Army. After his liberation, Henry joined and served with the Polish Battalion until the war ended. Of the six members of his family (his mother, father and siblings), Henry was the sole survivor of the Holocaust. In 1946, Henry immigrated to the United States and settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan, learning English at Union High School and working to build a life for himself. Eventually, he became a real estate developer. Henry and his wife, Beatrice, were married in 1948, raised two children, Steve and Linda, and were proud grandparents to Alissa, Stephanie, and Nathan. Henry believed strongly in treating everyone with dignity and respect, caring for others, and giving back. He valued education and strong personal character. While the trauma of the Holocaust remained with Henry, he was determined not to let it define him. **When asked what message he would like to leave to future generations, Henry said, "To never let anything like this happen to any group of people. To resist hatred and scapegoating."**

To enter, students will submit an original poetry, prose, art or a combined project, incorporating the theme, along with an Artist or Author Statement.

The Holocaust, while singular in its scope and horror, is not an isolated event. The 20th century bore witness to multiple genocides and mass atrocities in which entire groups of people were targeted, dehumanized, and nearly destroyed. From Armenia to Cambodia, from Bosnia to Rwanda, societies across the world have struggled with the same forces of hatred, propaganda, and violence.

During the Holocaust, six million Jews were murdered, and when including other persecuted groups, the total rises to over eleven million lives lost. It remains one of the most thoroughly documented genocides in history, offering evidence not only of its scale but also of how organized propaganda, bureaucracy, and silence allowed it to unfold.

By studying the Holocaust alongside other genocides, we see not only the devastating uniqueness of each event, but also the patterns and warning signs they share. Comparing these histories deepens our understanding of how ordinary people can be swept into extraordinary violence—and how remembering across contexts may help us prevent such atrocities in the future.

"A destruction, an annihilation that only man can provoke, only man can prevent."
-Elie Wiesel

Project Prompt Interwoven Histories

October 20, 2025 - March 8, 2026

Words, images, and memory connect the past to the present. The Holocaust and other genocides of the 20th century reveal both differences and striking similarities in how hatred and exclusion escalate to violence and mass murder. Studying these histories side by side allows us to recognize recurring patterns—propaganda, silence, complicity, and the failure to protect vulnerable communities—that pave the way to atrocity.

Guided by what you learn, create an art or writing piece that examines the Holocaust in connection with one or more other 20th-century (1900-1999) genocides or mass atrocities. Your work should reflect how history is interwoven, and how lessons from the Holocaust illuminate the enduring dangers of hatred in all its forms.



**2025-26
Contest Webpage
& Resources**

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Submit Your Project Electronically: wgvu.org/pestka

- Upload your entry to our file share site via the link on The Contest page.
- Required for each participant: Completed Entry Form.
- Artist/Author Statements: Upload as a PDF or Word document.
- Poetry/prose entries: Upload as a PDF or Word document.
- Art entries: Upload photos (maximum of 5, jpeg or png).
- Deadline for receipt (time stamp) of entries: March 8, 2026, 11:59pm.

**The Partnership reserves the option to extend this deadline due to circumstances impacting our region/state (such as COVID).*



Safe spaces for productive conversation and creative expression are integral to creating meaningful learning experiences. The Henry Pestka Art & Poetry Contest is designed for students who are completing Michigan state education requirements for Holocaust and Genocide Education, enabling them the opportunity to process and reflect on the concepts they learned through writing or art.

Appropriate Content Policy

All entries must contain appropriate content. Content that is aimed to defame, marginalize, discriminate, demean, or infringe on the human dignity of others, living or deceased, is not permitted. Explicit language, violence, hate speech, or sexual content are not permitted in entries. Most related to this contest, Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and Xenophobia can be especially insidious forms of bigotry, presenting in subtle, but harmful ways.

Original Work & AI Policy

All submitted writing and art projects must be solely the creation of the students' original thoughts, ideas, expressions, words, reflections and artistic expressions. Plagiarism, a serious academic offense, includes copying words or ideas from someone else without giving credit, the failure to put quotation marks around unmodified content that was copied from an outside source, and the use of photos, graphs, charts, or other images without acknowledging their source.

Additionally, **all submitted writing and art projects must be solely the entrant's original work, and MAY NOT, even partially, originate from AI generation, AI tools, or AI generated sources.** This includes, but is not limited to, project components such as images, designs, phrases or summaries from AI platforms, tools, software, filters, libraries etc.

Parents and educators may help their student(s) with gathering materials and encouraging project ideas or by supporting and fostering critical thinking and creativity, but all ideas and work must be original to the student(s).

Privacy & Safety Policy

Entrants are encouraged to use good judgement about what may be shared publicly, and parents, teachers and school advisors are asked to assist by monitoring identifying personal information shared by students in parts of entries that may be posted publicly (full names, school, social media handles, etc.). Additionally, **entries containing images or stories of people or organizations** (outside of those belonging to the student and that are not already publicly available) **MUST provide written consent** to be included with the entry form. **All parents/guardians must provide consent for students** (under the age of 18) **to participate** and also must **sign the media release**.

Whether intentional or unintentional, entries determined to be in violation of the Appropriate Content Policy will be disqualified and are not subject to appeal or review.

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Artist/Author Statement Prompt Interwoven Histories

In the context of what you have learned about the Holocaust, how does your art or writing project reflect the power of words?

Statements should be written in first person and include:

- Appropriate spelling and grammar.
- A description that helps the audience better experience what you've created.
 - What is your project about?
 - What was your reason for making the project?
 - What is your intention for the work – what do you hope it does for or means to others?
- Be sure to include (can be part of the description above):
 - How your project connects to what you have learned about the theme “Interwoven Histories”.

Formatting for Artist/Author Statements

- Artist/Author Statement should be titled the same as the project title.
- Statements must be typed, on one side of the paper.
- Artist/Author statements must be typed and uploaded with projects as a PDF or Word document.
- Statements must not include graphics, drawings, or other images.
- Limit of 500 words.

Have questions? We're happy to help!

To connect with a WGVU Education Team member, e-mail education@wgvu.org or call 616.331.6666.

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Project Requirements Interwoven Histories

2D Art Entries

- **Submissions in this category can include:** drawing, painting, photography, digital art, images, mixed media, mosaics, and collage.
- Projects should be individual.
- In addition to meeting all Contest Eligibility Rules and Requirements, **each entry must include a completed official Contest Entry Form**, with the required signature of a parent/guardian, consenting to allowing their child to enter, confirming that the entry is original work, and granting certain rights to entry materials.
- An **Artist's Statement** will be required as part of the online entry form.
- Renderings of another's work will be disqualified. Please note that all images, whether computer, artist, or photo generated must be the creation of the student artist.
- Art submission entry forms should be accompanied by photos of the artwork photos (maximum of 5, jpeg or png).
- If selected as a finalist, students will be asked to deliver their project to Meijer Gardens about two weeks prior to the Celebration.
- All Art entries must be a relevant, clear expression within the category and theme. Entries that do not follow the criteria will be disqualified.

Formatting for Art

- Regardless of delivery method (digital or hard copy), all entrants must complete the online submission form.
- Art entries must be legibly labeled with entrant's name, grade, and project title on the back.
- Entries must be titled and include the student's name and grade on a title page or at the top of the first page.
- **Submissions must be two-dimensional** and wall-fixable (shelf or hanging) only, on medium **no thicker than 3/4"**. **Minimum size of 8" x 8" and maximum of 24" x 36"**.
- Artwork must not be matted or framed.
- Fixative spray must be applied to charcoal, pencil, pastel, and chalk art.
- Artists can use charcoal, pencil, pastel, chalk, watercolors, acrylics, or oils.
- Acknowledgement of sources – to protect copyright holders, proper citation of all sources is required. Permission for sources that are not public domain must be obtained in writing from the copyright holder and submitted with entry.

Poetry Entries

- Projects should be individual.
- In addition to meeting all Contest Eligibility Rules and Requirements, **each entry must include a completed official Contest Entry Form**, with the required signature of a parent/guardian, consenting to allowing their child to enter, confirming that the entry is original work, and granting certain rights to entry materials.
- An **Author's Statement** will be required as part of the online entry form.
- All Poetry entries must be a relevant, clear expression within the category and theme. Writing submissions must adhere to the word count requirements. Entries that do not follow the criteria will be disqualified.

Formatting for Poetry

- All entrants must complete the online submission form, and poetry entries must be uploaded as a PDF.
- Entries must be titled and include the student's name and grade on a title page or at the top of the first page.
- Entries must be typed, on one side of the paper.
- Entries must not include graphics, drawings, or other images. It must be clear that the entry is a poem, and not artwork.
- Poetry content should not include reference to student or school name.
- Poems **MUST** fit onto one 8.5 x 11 page and remain legible (approximately 50 line limit).

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Project Requirements Interwoven Histories

Prose Entries

- Projects should be individual.
- In addition to meeting all Contest Eligibility Rules and Requirements, **each entry must include a completed official Contest Entry Form**, with the required signature of a parent/guardian, consenting to allowing their child to enter, confirming that the entry is original work, and granting certain rights to entry materials.
- An **Author's Statement** will be required as part of the online entry form.
- All Prose entries must be a relevant, clear expression within the category and theme. Writing submissions must adhere to the word count requirements. Entries that do not follow the criteria will be disqualified.

Formatting for Prose

- All entrants must complete the online submission form, and poetry entries must be uploaded as a PDF.
- Entries must be titled and include the student's name and grade on a title page or at the top of the first page.
- Entries must be typed, on one side of the paper, and include page numbers.
- Entries must not include graphics, drawings, or other images. It must be clear that the entry is a poem, and not artwork.
- Prose content should not include reference to student or school name.
- Entries may be **no more than 500 words**, and may include fiction/story, argumentative, or expository writing.

Combined 2D Art & Writing

- Projects should be individual.
- In addition to meeting all Contest Eligibility Rules and Requirements, **each entry must include a completed official Contest Entry Form**, with the required signature of a parent/guardian, consenting to allowing their child to enter, confirming that the entry is original work, and granting certain rights to entry materials.
- An **Artist's Statement** will be required as part of the online entry form.
- Renderings of another's work will be disqualified. Please note that all images, whether computer, artist, or photo generated must be the creation of the student artist.
- Art submission entry forms should be accompanied by photos of the artwork photos (maximum of 5, jpeg or png).
- If selected as a finalist, students will be asked to deliver their project to Meijer Gardens about two weeks prior to the Celebration.
- All Combined entries must be a relevant, clear expression within the category and theme. Entries that do not follow the criteria will be disqualified.
- **Submissions can include:** photography, digital art, mixed media, mosaics, comic book art, collage, and cartoons.

Formatting for Combined

- Regardless of delivery method (digital or hard copy), all entrants must complete the online submission form.
- Art entries must be legibly labeled with entrant's name, grade, and project title on the back.
- Entries must be titled and include the student's name and grade on a title page or at the top of the first page.
- **Submissions must be two-dimensional** and wall-fixable (shelf or hanging) only, on medium **no thicker than ¼"**. **Minimum size of 8" x 8" and maximum of 24" x 36"**.
- Artwork must not be matted or framed.
- Fixative spray must be applied to charcoal, pencil, pastel, and chalk art.
- Artists can use charcoal, pencil, pastel, ink, chalk, watercolors, acrylics, or oils.
- Written content should not include reference to student or school name.
- Writing submissions must adhere to the word count requirements: **(50 lines for poetry or 500 words for prose)**.
- Acknowledgement of sources – to protect copyright holders, proper citation of all sources is required. Permission for sources that are not public domain must be obtained in writing from the copyright holder and submitted with entry.

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Eligibility & Entry Guidelines

- No purchase necessary to enter or win. Entries will be accepted between October 20, 2025 at 8:00AM and March 8, 2026 at 11:59pm.
- Entrants are highly encouraged to use the accompanying curriculum and resources as the foundation for their projects.
- Entrants must reside in a West and Southwest Michigan county and be enrolled in (or equivalent to) 6th – 12th grade during the 2025-2026 school year in a public, private, faith-based, charter, or home-school setting.
- Entries must be individual projects, and only one entry per person will be accepted; all subsequent entries will be disqualified.
- Each entry must include a completed official Contest Entry Form submitted via Jot Form, with the required teacher/school information and parent/guardian permission, confirming that the entry is the student's original work, and granting certain rights to entry materials. All entry materials must be complete and legible to be eligible.
- It is the responsibility of each parent, teacher and/or advisor to obtain and read these contest rules, requirements and guidelines.
- All submitted entries must be the entrants' original work and may not contain AI (see policy).
- Entries must meet privacy policy guidelines and contain appropriate content (see policy).
- Failure to meet rules and requirements may result in disqualification. The Partnership reserves the right in its sole discretion to disqualify ineligible entries; such entries will not be returned.
- Each entry must meet category guidelines and requirements. See guidelines section for category requirements.

Contest Rules & Policies

Judging, Awards & Notification

All entries submitted will be judged using the judging criteria below by a panel of judges organized through The Partnership. Identifying information will be redacted during the judging process to increase impartiality and members of The Partnership with direct or close proximity to student entries will not be permitted to judge entries. The ten entries with the highest percentage in each grade will be deemed as finalists for their respective grade. Judging for each grade will occur on the dates as set forth by The Partnership. The judging criteria and percentages used by any judging in connection with The Contest shall be scored and graded using the rubric within this document.

All decisions of the judges are final and binding and not subject to appeal or review. In the event of any ties, to determine the highest percentage finalists, the entry with the highest score in creativity and originality category from among all tying entries will be deemed the finalist. Finalists' entries may be posted on The Contest website at wgvu.org/pestka.

Return of Entries

The Contest administrators are not required to return entries. Every effort will be made to help facilitate return of entries to students. The designated person in The Contest Entry Form will be notified via email that the entry is ready for pick up and MUST claim the entry within two weeks. The Partnership reserves the right to dispose of or donate entries not claimed within the designated two-week claim period.

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Contest Rules & Policies

Culminating Event & Prizes

Finalists will be notified on or about April 1, 2026. The top 10 Finalists from each grade will be invited to attend and be recognized at the Henry Pestka Art & Poetry Competition Event (Event)** in May 2026. Finalists will be asked to arrange for their projects to be brought to a designated West Michigan Holocaust Partner location two weeks prior to the event to be curated and displayed in a gallery-style format. Please note that eligibility for prizes is based on attendance at the Event – and all Finalists who attend will receive recognition and a gift. The top three finalists from each grade level will additionally qualify to receive a certificate and a cash award: First Place \$150; Second Place \$100; and Third Place \$50 - generously provided by The Jewish Federation of Grand Rapids, Henry Pestka Holocaust Memorial Endowment Fund. Prizes/gifts are not redeemable for cash, non-transferable, and non-substitutable, except at the sole discretion of The Partnership.

** The Partnership reserves the option to modify/cancel this event in compliance with state/regional group and event regulations.

Rights Associated with The Contest

Submission of the Entry Form constitutes permission from the participant's parent/legal guardian for The West Michigan Holocaust Partnership organizations to use the participants' name, likeness, biographical information, and materials contained in the Entry Form, photographs, and any statements or remarks made about The Contest in advertising and promotion without further compensation or permission, except where prohibited by law. All entries, and any copyrights therein, become the sole property of The West Michigan Holocaust Partnership. By entering, entrants' parent/legal guardian agree to abide by the above stated rules and warrant that their child's/ward's entry is their original work and does not infringe upon or violate rights of any third party, and grant to The Partnership the right to edit, publish, promote, and otherwise use their entry materials without permission, notice or compensation. No royalties will be paid at this or any time. By submitting an entry and Entry Form, each participant's parent/legal guardian, on behalf of the participant, agrees to assign all right, title, and interest in and to the entry and Entry Form to The West Michigan Holocaust Partnership and warrants that the participant's parent/legal guardian has the authority to assign such right, title and interest. In the event that any applicable law requires certain formalities to be fulfilled to effectuate such grant of rights, each participant (and parent or guardian) agrees to cooperate with The West Michigan Holocaust Partnership.

Have questions? We're happy to help!

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Contest Rubric

Scores will be based on each student's grade level.

Artist/Author Statement (5 points)

All participants must submit an author/artist statement that explains to the judging committee more about their piece. This is an important opportunity for participants to share their passion and choices.

Prompt: In the context of what you have learned about the Holocaust, how does your art or writing project reflect the power of words?

- Written in first person. Appropriate spelling and grammar. (1 point)
- A description that helps the audience better experience the project. (2 points)
 - What is the project about; what is the reason for the project; what is the creator's intention/hope for what it will mean to others?
- How the project showcases the theme, **Interwoven Histories**. (2 points)

Project	1 (lacking)	2 (sufficient)	3 (well-done)	4 (exceptional)
Form & Guidelines How the various elements in the project work together to communicate an idea within the creator's chosen format.	Project lacks unity or order. Missing details and/or what is included is not fitting or appropriate.	Project is partially developed and shows limited unity and order. Details are somewhat fitting or appropriate.	Project is developed with unity and order. Most details are fitting and appropriate.	Project is well-developed with strong unity and order. All details are fitting and appropriate.
Creativity & Originality Generating ideas and approaches based on previous experiences, but presenting them in a way not seen before; innovative.	A unique perspective is not evident, and approach seems cliched and/or uninteresting. Project feels like someone else's perspective, lacking creative enhancements to engage.	A unique perspective is somewhat evident. The project shows some imagination but lacks originality and has few creative enhancements.	Individual voice and unique perspective are evident; a creative and innovative approach grabs the audience. Project includes some creative enhancements.	Distinct voice and unique perspective are very evident; a highly creative and innovative approach grabs the audience. Project is expressive, including creative enhancements and engaging elements.
Chosen Details & Technique The way in which the creator leverages known techniques in art/writing to intentionally communicate a message or story to evoke a desired response from the audience.	Overall project lacks coherence and is difficult to understand. Lack of structure and details create an overgeneralized or vague message. Audience is unmoved by work.	Structure and details present a somewhat clear meaning. Use of appropriate tools lead to a minimally clear tone and meaning. Evokes a limited response from the audience.	Elements flow together to enhance the meaning of the message. Uses appropriate tools and details to create tone and meaning. Evokes a moderate response from the audience.	Elements flow seamlessly together to enhance the meaning of the message. Effectively and skillfully uses unique choices and details to create tone and meaning. Evokes a strong response from the audience.
Interpretation of Theme Interwoven Histories Insightful connections that meaningfully bridge a foundational understanding of the subject matter with a cohesively developed, relevant idea for the audience to consider.	Message does not capture nor maintain the reader's attention and does not maintain a focus. Does not show an understanding of the theme – misses points and has quite a few misinterpretations.	Message is somewhat engaging but lacks focus. Displays a somewhat clear understanding of the content and theme but may have a few misinterpretations.	Message is engaging and clear. Shows an understanding of the major themes. Demonstrates clear understanding of content and applies the theme throughout.	Message is compelling, engaging, and very clear. Shows a sophisticated understanding of the themes in the work and applies theme in complex ways.
Overall Meaningful connections between the theme and subject. Captures audiences' attention or evokes an emotional response. Project causes reader to think on a higher level. Wow factor.	Accomplished the purpose of the project partially or indirectly, and little craftsmanship was attempted or demonstrated in covering the topic	Accomplished the project in an adequate manner. The topic is covered reasonably well, and some craftsmanship is demonstrated.	Accomplished the project in a capable manner. The topic is well-covered and successful attempts toward craftsmanship are demonstrated.	Accomplished the project in an exceptional manner. Overall project craftsmanship is impeccable.

TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS: 25