

# Veterans For Peace: Peace Poetry Contest

*Organized Locally. Recognized Nationally. Exposing the true costs of war since 1985.*

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## How To: Organize a Peace Poetry Contest

Children and their teachers care deeply about peace and are eager to express their visions of a peaceful world. And parents also share in this celebration. Often a parent will phone in a confirmation the same day their child was notified that his or her poem was chosen. They want to insure that we know the family will be at our annual reading to hear their son or daughter read their winning entry.

A key point we make is that our contest holds no formal position on the current state of world affairs; still we want to honor the ideal of peace. Poet Laureate Robert Haas perhaps said it best: “Poetry, when it takes sides, when it proposes solutions, isn’t any smarter than anybody else.” This is important because we are non-partisan, and are not using the contest for any purpose other than asking children to consider what peace means to them. The contest is meant to reinforce that peace is a uniquely human conception and affirms the human spirit. It is especially important to remember that peace is not merely a goal but a human right. In that spirit of reflection and affirmation, we encourage educators to explore the importance of peace with their students by calling upon them to contribute a poem or piece of artwork to this type of contest.

## Announcing the Contest

When you announce the contest makes a difference. We’ve found that teachers need lead time to plan for a peace poetry writing unit. So, we send out announcements before or immediately after the Thanksgiving break. The start of the holiday season offers a great time for students to think about peace and goodwill. Despite the horror of child neglect and abuse, violence in schools, street gang violence and now a perpetual war on terror children are forced to confront, they do manage to write about what peace means to them; what it might mean to the world if it would listen, and how they love and cherish many others in their lives – friends, families, and pets.

It’s important to consider a number of rules and conditions before you announce the program. For instance, does the contest intend to promote a specific cause like ending the Iraq war or will the contest be broader than that, emphasizing the larger quest for peace at all levels of society?

Beyond this philosophical position, basic issues need to be clarified at the outset: How firmly will you hold to the submission deadline? Will you accept more than one entry per person? How will the poems be submitted – hard page copy or emailed? Should they be typed? Will you return the poems and drawings? Here is our policy statement from the announcement flyer.

**Format:** Any style, typed or hand-printed. Only one original poem per entry.

**Identification:** Include a single copy of the poem with the poet’s name, affiliation, address, phone number and contact email address in the upper right-hand corner. Other Considerations Obtaining an updated address list for schools and superintendents is crucial. Once names of

administrators and school addresses are gathered, we send out announcement letters and reproducible flyers to teachers who have participated in the past, as well as to school principals, superintendents and public libraries. We also write and submit press releases to newspapers, local radio stations, school newsletters and community bulletins.

## Organizing Submissions

If the contest deadline is March 15th and you haven't received many entries by March 1st, don't fret. Our experience has been that entries typically flood in within days of the deadline.

However, you have to decide if your cutoff date is firm. Some entries will arrive after the deadline but postmarked earlier, or you'll find them hand carried by a harried teacher with a bulging manila envelope that he forgot to mail. Consider how you will handle this before it occurs.

Aside from that concern, how you organize the entries when they first appear is important. The entries will be submitted in two ways: **teacher submission** – a teacher will submit a class set or **individual submission** – an individual student will submit a single entry. Whether submitted electronically, snail mail or hand-carried, here's how to organize incoming entries. Use Microsoft Excel or some other spreadsheet to organize a list of student entries: The list headings should include: **Student Name; Poem Title; Grade; Teacher; School Address**. This log provides needed information that goes into the chapbook and in the letters you will send out. Have someone take charge of this logging activity as entries arrive will facilitate a smooth and efficient organization of these materials.

## Judging Entries

We invite three faculty and three students to judge the entries within a week's time. Judges are asked to pick a minimum of twenty five (25-30) winning entries for each of the three grade levels to appear in the chapbook. Those students would also be invited to read their poems in May.

## Contacting Entrants

Ideally, we would like to use more email to contact students and teachers to cut down on costs. Also, email is not always reliable. So we continue to send out letters to announce the status of each entry once the judging is complete.

If a teacher sent in the original entry or entries, we send a letter to the teacher at the school listing the students whose poems were chosen and those who were not. Letters to parents inviting the student to participate in the public reading are included in this mailing. Teachers send the letters home with the students. If an individual student submitted an entry, we send that student a letter to the return address on the submission.

In the letter, we include an RSVP date and contact number (in our case, the department secretary who has a sign-up sheet. It is not unusual for commitment calls to flood the office right up to the night of the reading which makes it difficult to estimate the number of attendees.

## Creating the Chapbook

For weeks the poems and artwork have appeared as separate creations, judged and organized according to merit. Now they must be coalesced into a manageable stack and fashioned into a chapbook. You will need to consider what the book's cover might look like; how many pages the poems and artwork would need; and, most importantly, how to reproduce this work for public distribution.

It's all about budget because printing the chapbook is the major contest expense. The chapbooks (staple bound) cost about \$1.15 each for a 50-page booklet. Costs vary according to the length and binding of the chapbook published. Printing 500 books will cost over \$600. We print that many because the books are also a public relations tool for the following year's contest. Each winning entrant gets two copies at the reading event. Parents often want to buy a few from our table at the reading event to send to family and friends (They make excellent holiday gifts.)

The best advice is to secure a commercial printer or other duplication service early. Determine your production needs, budget and schedule. Remind the printer that this is a non-profit, school project. Often a printer will give a discount, and maybe a donation, if you offer to place the company's ad in the book. If funding is an issue, why not solicit several ads (local insurance companies, manufacturers, clothiers, non-profits, etc.) for the chapbook? Placing ads in the back of the book can offset costs and, in some cases, pay for all the printing!

## Time and Other Considerations

Creating the chapbook is the most time consuming part of the program for two reasons: some entries haven't been typed; and even when the person(s) using desktop publishing has good skills, the process of design and layout, correcting for omissions, etc. takes time and attention to detail. Try to find someone who has done this before, and get another staffer trained along the way. If you want to learn a new desktop publishing program while you are creating the chapbook, my students who have done so have said: "Give yourself plenty of lead time!" We have also learned that at least three people need to proofread against the original poems and artwork (not the photocopies). When the chapbook layout is finished, we've found that names are misspelled or mixed with other names; the school or grade had been omitted; the wrong name appears on the right poem; poem type had shifted during layout, and the poem appears different than author had intended. We try to be meticulous but despite our good intentions, mistakes happen. Once the 500 or so chapbooks are off to be published at the printer, it's too late to make corrections. So patience and careful scrutiny at this stage is imperative, if for no other reason than the sanity of those working on the project.

Covers are a relatively simple matter. In the early years, we just typed the title "Peace Poetry" and the project name on the cover. Using a piece of the artwork submitted for the contest would be a good way to add pizzazz to the cover. Last year, one of our students submitted a photo of a child giving peace signs at a protest rally. Printed as a black and white photo, and used on our website, there was no additional cost to print a cover photo. For more creativity and choice, try to keep the need for a cover in mind as you move through the various stages of the contest. All too often, we discovered we hadn't considered what could be used for a cover until the chapbook began to take shape.

Don't forget to include school names (with teachers involved), thank you remarks to volunteers (i.e.- English Department Chair, the Dean and Provost, judges, anyone who helped with technical support, etc.), and anyone else who has supported the contest. The Preface with acknowledgements is more important than you think. Seeing oneself thanked goes a long way in continuing support for a project!

## Planning a Public Reading Event

Planning for the reading should begin early. Identify a location, the date and time to hold the reading. Possible locations include a local school auditorium, a community center, or on the campus of a college or university. *NCPPC* has held its reading on the SUNY Potsdam campus. Because we operate out of a college English department, hosting students on campus was a natural choice. We found that inviting students to a local college campus benefits both the college – by providing support to our admission program – and the students – by providing public recognition beyond their local community; it gives them a sense of what is possible in their lives. As a college in a rural setting, many of our writers come to the college campus for the first-time. In many cases, their parents have never set foot on a college campus either. When they arrive, faculty supporters and cheerful English and Communication students go out of their way to welcome families and make their visit memorable.

While location is a major consideration, the event itself needs solid organization. You need to consider the following:

1. **Time and Date** – Student spring breaks should be considered. Holding the event well after these breaks is advisable. The Massachusetts veterans prefer a reading over a weekend in mid-afternoon. *NCPPC* has always held the event in the early evening – 6:30 or 7:00pm, always on a Friday eve with no school the next day. Because we live in colder regions of New York, and some students have to travel through the Adirondack Mountains to get to us, we try to take time and date into consideration so as not to put anyone at risk.
2. **Length of Reading Event** – Our event lasts no longer than an hour or so. Children tend to write short poems and may only be on stage for less than a minute or two, so it goes quickly. With over 50 readers last year, the event finished in a bit over an hour.
3. **Catering** – Will refreshments be made available? Cookies and punch are likely choices and are inexpensive. Individual staff can supply or it can be a budget item.
4. **Music** – *NCPPC* set up a speaker system for the presentations and ran music through a CD player as the audience began to fill the auditorium. In the future, we would like to have student musicians perform, and plan to invite young dancers from our campus Dance Department.
5. **Hospitality Table** – It's best to have two or three people staffing a table at the entrance.

A sign-in sheet can help the MC welcome readers to the stage with information such as teacher, grade, academic/personal interests, title of poem etc. Readers selected also would be given their copies of the chapbook when they arrive and fill out the form. We added a parental release that allows us to use both the videotaping and the material for publicity purposes. This allows us to archive the reading on our website and link it to the local public radio web as well.

Consider having a “runner” who would come to deliver names of those who might show up without having phoned in an RSVP. Anxious parents and their young poets can suddenly appear half way into the program! Our student “runners” have seamlessly allowed us to include any unexpected arrivals.

**6. Video/DVD taping** – We use student help along with a dear friend of the college community to tape the reading event. Adding two cameras allows him to provide a view of audience reactions and the child reading the poem. He also generously gives his free time to create the DVD and make copies for those supporting the contest.

**7. Traffic Flow** – Anyone who has ever seen someone called up to the stage from auditorium seating knows that this takes time and is, at best, awkward. To make this traffic flow to and from the stage more efficient, we move readers from left to right. Students are called in pairs; one onto the stage, one ready to go at the front of the left aisle. So another student is always at the bottom of the stage ready to move up to the microphone. This feature has vastly improved the time we get to spend with students on stage, dialoguing about who they are, what they like etc. It also gives the audience a focus other than paying attention to a child climbing over knees and the backs of chairs trying to get to an aisle to make her way to the stage.

## Evaluating the Program

Simply put: the proof is in the pudding. You would know that your contest is effective when You are asked by local teachers for the starting date of this year’s contest;

- ✓ Letters of thanks appear
- ✓ Your college administrators keep copies of the chapbook on their office coffee tables
- ✓ Teachers request copies of the chapbook long after the reading event has taken place
- ✓ Students begin emailing entries before you announce the contest
- ✓ Your staff support inquires about when to show up for initial mailings
- ✓ You feel the passion for another contest building inside you and you want to do even more!

## A Brief Checklist of Activities

### Late November

- ✓ Mail Peace Poetry Contest announcement letter and flyer to community schools and libraries.

### January/February

- ✓ Set reading event date and location so these can be included in press releases and on posters.
- ✓ Write and submit press releases to newspapers, local radio stations, school newsletters and community bulletins.
- ✓ Create posters for distribution as reading event approaches. *NCPPC* usually sends small colored posters on plain paper with the letter inviting students, teachers, and parents to the reading.
- ✓ Identify judges.
- ✓ Line up staff to cater or take charge of other event-related activities.
- ✓ Secure commercial printer or other duplication service to determine production needs, price and schedule.
- ✓ Think about prizes. It is not too early to think about the kinds of prizes you want to offer

### March

- ✓ Remind about March 15<sup>th</sup> deadline using emails.
- ✓ Organize spreadsheet and other computer-related activities so names, addresses, etc. can be sorted when submissions are received.
- ✓ Sort submissions according to school and grade and prepare folders for judging.
- ✓ Distribute folders to judges with deadlines. If judging is to take place in a group format, enjoy as a social event!

### April

- ✓ Complete judging by the end of first or second week in April (March 15 submission deadline).
- ✓ Send out letters to all entrants, announcing winners and thanking those who participated.
- ✓ Selected entries get invitations and small poster.
- ✓ Prepare list of students who have been selected to appear in the chapbook and would be invited to participate at the public reading. Assign someone to receive RSVPs by phone and emails.
- ✓ Create "Peace Poetry Chapbook."
- ✓ Send chapbook and award certificates to the printer.
- ✓ Develop the reading event. Assign tasks from tabling to taping.

### Early May

- ✓ Design and print sign-in sheets for reading event. Include parental release form.
- ✓ Organize any displays for the evening: peace posters, children's drawings that accompanied entries etc.
- ✓ Phone and email local media to reinforce date, time and location of reading event.

## CONTEST RULES

1. Poems should focus (a) on thoughts of peace and the abolition of war, hate, or violence; (b) on what I can do to help make a peaceful world for all; (c) on some of the ways war can be avoided; (d) on inner peace-how we become peaceful within ourselves so that we can face the "other person" with mercy and forgiveness; or (e) on examples of non-violent attitudes and actions that lead to friendship, negotiation, social justice and peace.

2. Each contestant may submit only one poem, no more than 50 lines, rhymed or free verse. Poems will be photocopied for a booklet to be given to each winner, so please try to keep poems on one 8 1/2 X 11 page.

3. The following should appear at the top of the page: Title and author's name. Entries from K-12 should also include at the top of the page: Grade, name of school, town, and teacher's name. At the bottom or back of page please include your address, phone number and email (if appropriate for contact with winners).

4. All entries must be original and unpublished. Previous prize-winning poems are ineligible. Any entry of questionable originality will be disqualified. Help with spelling and grammar is permissible at appropriate levels, but providing words or phrases will disqualify an entry.