

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

About Submissions

What is the contest theme? Young readers write to an author describing how that author's work somehow changed the reader's view of the world or himself/herself. Readers respond to the book they've read by exploring the personal relationship between themselves, the author and the book's characters or themes.

What is the deadline for submission? December 12, 2009. This is a postmark deadline.

Can children write to authors no longer living? Absolutely. Children can write to authors of fiction or nonfiction, including speeches; poets and playwrights. However, we do not accept letters to musicians or authors of song lyrics

Can a child write more than one letter? No. If we receive more than one letter, we simply eliminate all but the first letter received.

Will the letters be answered or forwarded to the authors? Unfortunately, no. Because of the huge volume of letters received, the staff can neither answer letters nor forward the letters to the authors. Children should make a copy of their letter prior to submitting it to the contest.

Can children write to the authors of poetry and nonfiction books? Yes. We also accept letters to authors of speeches.

Can children write to the authors of song lyrics or comic books? Although graphic novels are allowed, comic strips, comic books, and song lyrics are not allowed.

Must the child's home address be on the letter itself or can the return address be the school's? We understand the confidentiality that many school districts require to keep students' home addresses private. On both the entry coupon and the letter itself a return address is necessary, but a school address is just fine. Home addresses are not required to enter. However, should a child's letter advance to state-level judging and then take one of the state prizes, home information will be necessary.

Must the letters be typewritten? No, but keep in mind that handwritten entries are sometimes very difficult to read. If handwritten, then neatness (and ink) is a real help. If our judges can't read the letter, we can't assess and therefore advance them.

Is this contest open to homeschooled students? Yes, and in the past many homeschooled children have taken top state prizes.

We have just completed studying a novel in class. Can the entire class write about the same book? We discourage this as we think it misses the spirit of the contest theme, that is how a particular work changed a reader's view of self or the world. Not all books are personally relevant to all readers. Allowing the reader to choose the book that means the most to him/her is one step in the process of reflective writing so necessary to this program.

About Judging & Notification of Winners

Who judges the letters? Judges include authors, publishers, librarians, and educators from all 50 states. The first two rounds of reading determine which letters advance to state-level judging. First place state winners only advance for national judging.

What educational value does LAL have for my child/students? Research supports the link between reading and writing: children who read, write better; children who write, read more. LAL challenges students by asking that they write to a particular audience (the author of a book rather than a teacher) with a specific purpose (to explain or describe his or her personal reader response to the work). By encouraging personal reader response and reflexive writing, LAL encourages meaningful reading and helps to create successful writers.

What are the competition levels? Level I: grades 4-6; Level II: grades 7-8; Level III: grades 9-12.

My child is in third grade but reads on a higher level. Can he/she still enter? Unfortunately, no. Our official rules state that a child must be in at least grade 4 to compete. But we would certainly welcome your child's letter next year.

Who selects the state winners? Each state has its own panels of state judges. However, not every letter submitted advances to state-level judging. Letters must first advance through two rounds of reading by the LAL Central judges. These include former classroom teachers and graduate students with knowledge of children's literature and the reading-writing process.

If I have a child who wins, will that child's name and/or letter automatically be published? Not without the signed permission of a parent or guardian! Rest assured, all children who receive a state or national prize will receive notification via snail mail or Email, including a permission release form. The parent/guardian signs this release and returns it to the state center (not the national office) and only then are names released and possibly some letters published. If a child prefers to withhold his/her name at the time of publication, that is acceptable but we must have complete names in order for the child to enter the contest.

When are the winners selected and notified? State winners are selected about mid-March and notified soon after. Selection of national winners occurs in April.

Who notifies the state winners and when? Each state center for the book notifies the winners from their state. The national office maintains communications between the state centers but does not contact each state winner. State winners can expect notification in March. National winners are announced in April.

Why does it take so long to select state and national winners? We read every letter! Last year, LAL received just under 60,000 letters. Just opening and logging letters takes weeks. Then come the rounds of reading. Of the 59,000+ letters received last year, our first team of judges eliminated approximately 50,000 to 51,000 letters. That means that approximately 8,000+ letters advanced to round 3, or state-level judging. From there, a whole new team of judges reads the letters.

Is a letter ever disqualified for plagiarism? The reader response concept of this writing assignment makes plagiarism less likely but yes, our judges do question the authenticity of a letter. If we are in doubt or suspect that an adult might have written a letter for a child, we contact the teacher or the parent to confirm the work is the child's own.

Whom should I contact for more information? All program materials, including lesson plans to guide students through the reader response process, are available for downloading at the LAL Website, www.lettersaboutliterature.org. Interested teachers, librarians, and parents can also contact the national program director at lal@epix.net. If preferred, you can also contact your state center for the book. A complete listing of state center affiliates including contact names and emails can be found by clicking on the "contact us" button on the menu, above left.