

Illinois
Humanities

10 Years of the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards

This guide is designed for educators, librarians, and parents to support Illinois's young writers as they develop their poetry writing skills and prepare submissions for the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards competition, presented by Illinois Humanities. We hope you will find both inspiration and useful information in the pages that follow.

**Ready to submit a poem?
Visit ILHUMANITIES.ORG/POETRY**



Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards Toolkit

Gwendolyn Brooks began the Youth Poetry Awards in 1969 during her tenure as Illinois Poet Laureate and continued to administer the awards until her passing in 2000.

The original youth poetry awards were born out of Ms. Brooks's belief that a poet laureate, "should do more than wear a crown — [she] should be of service to the young."

In honor of the centennial of Ms. Brooks's birth, Illinois Humanities joined with the Poetry Foundation, Brooks Permissions, and the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts to revive the awards in 2017. The Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards honor the tremendous legacy of Gwendolyn Brooks, the first Black author to win a Pulitzer Prize, and celebrate the words and experiences of young poets from across Illinois.

2026 marks the 10th anniversary of the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards! Since the revival of the awards, over 4,400 poems have been submitted by K-12 poets across the state. We hope you will join us this year in celebrating this tremendous legacy and contributing to the future of youth poetry in Illinois.

Share your own poetry writing tips with us by tagging us on social media at @ILHumanities or emailing poetry@ILHumanities.org — we'd love to celebrate our educators and the ways you're engaging young people with poetry!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- About Illinois Humanities and Gwendolyn Brooks **P2**
- Poetry Advice & Prompts **P3**
- Sample Winning Poems **P8**
- Competition Timeline, Process, & Rubric **P12**
- Information and Promotional Materials **P14**

Thank you for participating in this program. We look forward to reading the poetry of Illinois's young writers and to celebrating the hard work you put into supporting them!



ABOUT ILLINOIS HUMANITIES

Illinois Humanities is a statewide nonprofit organization that activates the humanities through ***free public programs, grants, and educational opportunities*** that spark conversation, foster reflection, build community, and strengthen civic engagement ***for everyone in Illinois.***

Founded in 1974, we are the state partner for the National Endowment for the Humanities and supported by state, federal, and private funds. We provide free, high-quality humanities experiences throughout Illinois, particularly for communities of color, individuals living on low incomes, counties and towns in rural areas, small arts and cultural organizations, and communities highly impacted by mass incarceration. Stay connected with us by subscribing to the Illinois Humanities newsletter at ILHumanities.org/subscribe, and following us on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn at @ILHumanities. Visit us online at ILHumanities.org.



ABOUT GWENDOLYN BROOKS

Born in Topeka, Kansas, June 7, 1917, Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks was brought home to Chicago after her first few weeks of life.

The first Black person to win a Pulitzer Prize (1950), she received over seventy honorary degrees as well as many other honors and awards, including Poet Laureate of Illinois, National Women's Hall of Fame inductee, an Academy of American Poets Fellowship, the National Medal of Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities's Jefferson Award and Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. Ms. Brooks published more than 20 works including several books of poetry for adults and children, one novel, writing manuals, and two volumes of an autobiography. She taught at several colleges and universities and created countless awards to inspire and support writers, young and old.

To date, five schools have been named after her, as well as the Illinois State Library and several other libraries and cultural centers.

Poetry Advice and Prompts

Illinois Humanities works with educators and writers across the state to support young poets. Here are some of our favorite tips, tricks, lesson plans, and resources.

Find more writing resources on our website at ILHumanities.org/Poetry.

SINGLE-DAY POETRY LESSONS:

(all of these are available at ILHumanities.org/Poetry-Resources)

- **K-2nd Grade Lesson Plan:** Poems Make You Feel Something
- **3rd-5th Grade Lesson Plan:** Using Contrasts to Tell a Story in Poetry
- **6th-8th Grade Lesson Plan:** Theme in Poetry
- **9th-12th Grade Lesson Plan:** Truth-Telling in Poetry

PREWRITING OR BRAINSTORMING:

Set the stage for success:

"Many students think that they are not poets. Get them to write freely, then work with them to arrange the words on paper to create form and rhythm. It's really easy. Also have students keep a folder of their poems. [Have students] write what comes to mind without thought of punctuation or spelling. Poetry doesn't have to rhyme."

— Georgette Lee, Thurgood Marshall Alternative High School (IDJJ)

Give students practice in noticing and naming what they like in poetry:

"READ a lot of poetry, take note of what your favorite poems do and how they do it, and try to imitate that."

— Matt Mitchell, University Laboratory High School

Create a classroom poetry library, starting here:

- [The Poetry Foundation's collection of Gwendolyn Brooks poems](#)
- [Chicago Public Library's National Poetry Month for Teens List](#)
- [Chicago Public Library's National Poetry Month for Kids List](#)
- [The Poetry Foundation's Children's Poems by Subject](#)

Build student confidence with a variety of quick prompts with this poet-created activity. These are great for older students:

- “ 1. **Letter to My Future Self:** Imagine yourself five years from now. Write a letter to that version of you—what do you want to remind them? What do you hope they have learned?
- 2. **Caged Bird Sings:** What does freedom mean to you? Write a poem about what freedom looks, feels, sounds, or tastes like.
- 3. **If These Walls Could Talk:** If the walls around you had voices, what stories would they tell? What would they whisper about the people who have passed through?
- 4. **The Weight of a Name:** What does your name mean to you? Who gave it to you? Does it fit, or does it feel like something borrowed?
- 5. **What I Carry:** We all carry things—memories, regrets, dreams. What do you carry with you every day, even when you don’t say it out loud?
- 6. **The Last Time I Felt Safe:** Write a poem about the last time you felt truly safe. Where were you? Who was with you? What did it smell like, taste like, sound like?
- 7. **Map to Somewhere Else:** If you could draw a map to another world, another life, another version of yourself—where would it lead?”

— Elgin Bokari Smith, Stomping Grounds Literary Arts Initiative

Use a video as a spark:

- [Video:](#) Poems about Heroes with Lucy Biederman
- [Video:](#) Watching the World (or) Where Do Poems Come From? with Nora Brooks Blakely

ENCOURAGING PLAY AND EXPERIMENTING WITH FORM:

Encourage students to play with dialogue and saying less:

“Hear talk in the street. There is much real poetry coming out of the mouths of people in the street. Many cliches, yes, but also vitality and colorful strengths. Your poem does not need to tell your reader everything. A little mystery is fascinating. Too much is irritating.”

— From *SEASONS: A Gwendolyn Brooks Experience*, edited by Nora Brooks Blakely and Cynthia A. Walls. Brooks Permissions and Third World Press Foundation, 2017.

Give students an opportunity to try out the same message in a few different forms:

“It is fun for students to identify poetic structure and patterns then be able to break those rules (but have a reason for doing so). Students enjoy the power to make their own line breaks, stanza length, shape poems.”

— Scott Merrill, Lorca Elementary

Use a Gwendolyn Brooks poem to explore the connection between the internal and the external with this teacher-created activity:

"Dreaming Out Loud

- 1. Read it:** Students can read 'kitchenette building' on their own. Then, students will listen to the poem for their second reading.
- 2. Notice it:** Next, students will work in groups and verbally share what they notice and what stood out to them. I like to allow this conversation to develop organically and then give them specifics to annotate for.
- 3. Annotate it:** Use annotations to notice how space makes dreaming difficult, and why the dream still matters. Annotate:
 - Interruptions: smells, chores, other people, etc.
 - Dreams: colors, light, imagination
 - Structure: long lines that feel crowded, places you wanted to pause for breath but can't
 - Shifts in Tone: where frustration increases; where hope emergesSometimes dreams are quiet and interrupted. Having poems with uncertainty shows off imperfections and how we can still move forward with hope. Poems that shift in tone can keep the audience guessing and show vulnerability.
- 4. Reimagine it:** Students will brainstorm a two-sided list. The left side will be a space that makes it hard to dream, and the right side will be a space that makes it easy to dream. Be sure to ask students the following questions:
 - Which side was easier to write? Why? What surprised you about the space where you dreamed best? How does Brooks's poem help explain your left side?
- 5. After completing their list,** students will take 15 minutes to craft their poem."

— Tim Ochoa, Oswego East High School

Use a video to help students play with imagery, metaphor, and simile in their poems:

- Video: Paint a Picture with Words with Samara Elán Huggins
- Video: Become a Master of Metaphor (and Simile) with Aanika Pfister

SHARPENING DETAILS:

Support students' revision process by showing, not telling, in their poetry:

"Think of each poem as a moment in time and capture everything that's happening in that moment - sights, sounds, and emotions."

— Lauren Beitler, Chicago Free School, Chicago

Help students strengthen how they describe actions with this teacher-created activity:

"Verbs Bite Back

1. **Create a chart with three columns:** Object, Animal, and Actions.
2. **Students should pick a list of objects** from a poem they are working on or ones they find repeatedly showing up in their poems. If they have to, they can generate a list of words, but it should be words that have some significance / [they have] associations with in some way.
3. **Next, for each object, think of an animal** that shares the qualities — physical or behavioral — of the object. They should also think about what connotation they want to use for the word when they select the animal.

Example: They chose an alarm clock because they hate to get up in the morning. School is also a struggle because they deal with clinical depression. They might choose a shark as the animal because they feel 'attacked out of nowhere' when it goes off. They also may feel like they are 'drowning' or 'adrift' in school.

This might be too difficult the first time, and if it is, they can just focus on matching the animal to the word for now and any associations (e.g. an old family bible is a snake because of the texture of the cover).

4. **In the Actions column,** they should think of (or research) behaviors / actions for the animal. A shark might hunt, swim, dart, circle, bite, or thrash.
5. **Now, combine the object with one of the actions** and don't mention the animal. 'It was the first day of school / and my alarm kept circling / my last hour of summer sleep / until it snapped its teeth on my last dream and thrashed me awake."

— Eric Bodwell, Neuqua Valley High School

COLLABORATION AND REVISION:

Help students make sure their intention matches their impact on the reader with this teacher-created activity:

"This Poem is About..."

When students are doing feedback groups (whole groups or partners) on poem drafts, this trick helps give some distance / clarity.

1. **Make sure everyone** has a copy of the poem being critiqued.
2. **After the student** whose poem is being critiqued reads it out loud to the group, all group members read the poem again silently.
3. **At the top of the paper**, everyone, including the creator of the poem, writes a 1-2 sentence statement of what the poem is 'about.' This should include what is literally happening in the poem and what they think the general idea / theme of the poem is.
Example: 'The poem is a conversation between the speaker and his father. His father wants him to be a doctor, but he wants to be a writer, and it is causing tension in their relationship.'
4. **When the critique is done**, copies of the now marked up poems are given back to the poet with the instruction that they should compare the statement they wrote about their own poem with those from the other group members. If the statements seem really different from their intention, they need to work on bridging the gap in their poems. If they wrote that their poem is about their brain and their heart, and everyone else says it seems to be about two friends arguing over a video game score, then they have some work to do.
5. **If the poems are only electronic**, or if you want to keep the statements more anonymous, use index cards or a Google form."

— Eric Bodwell, Neuqua Valley High School

Use this video to help students tell the story they really want to share in a poem:

- [Video: Telling a Story with Your Poem with Helene Achanzar](#)

Sample Winning Poems

Below is a selection of winning poems from the past few years. Please do not view these as prescriptive! Students should be encouraged to experiment with form, content, and voice. View even more winning poems online at ILHumanities.org/poetry.

Please refer to the rubric in the next section to see what our judges are seeking in successful submissions.

Ballgown, Please!

I'm wearing a pretend ballgown
We can't see it
It is pretend.
I found it in my closet
Kid, hold on!
I need to get dressed!
I will get you some food
After I get dressed
In my pretend ballgown
What do you want to eat?
Fruit Loops for breakfast, please!

— Jennifer Eklund, 1st grade (2025 winner)

Ode to a Library

I walk in and see stories floating up.
I choose one with caution and excitement
As I unravel the story inside.
The feelings poured into me as if it was almost real.

— Antonio Galindo, 2nd Grade (2020 winner)

Todas Somos Americanas: La Historia de Mi Abuela

We Are All Americans: My Grandma's Story

We
Are all Americans
Even out on seas
Mi Abuela says: "Here."
When someone asks: "Where are you from?"
"Puerto Rico"
We
Are all Americans
Remember Roberto Clemente
That baseball star?
We have your autographed picture
Hanging on our wall
Or María Cadilla Colón de Martínez
A women's rights activist?
María Cadilla Colón de Martínez high school
That's where my Abuela went to school
They Are all Americans
They Are all Puerto Ricans
Mi Abuela
Mi Abuelo
Mi Papá
Y yo
Puerto Rico
Unincorporated US territory
You flow through me from island to mainland
Like geese in their triangle formations
Coming back after a long winter
Don't forget
We Are all Americans

— Lyra Rivera, 6th grade (2022 winner)

Once a Burden

The mirror in my vanity reflects my ugly truth:
Body hair, acne, dry skin,
My fingers, puffy and unmanicured
I notice the bumps on my face at age ten
And pick and squeeze until they bleed

I watch the TV, I go online, I scroll through social media
And photos of girls I want to look like flood my feed
Victoria's Secret and makeup ads bombard my brain
And the seeds of my insecurities sprout.
I'm tempted by foundations I pass in stores
my mom says, you don't need them, they'll damage your skin!
But my self-image is already cracked

Kids in class snicker, hiss like snakes in the halls
I stick out like a sore thumb,
I don't wear expensive brands
I recycle outfits and don't have the time
To get my hair braided like other girls in school

The world broadcasts its version of pretty:
Long, silky, untangled hair
Clear skin & slim everything
I look at my dolls and get jealous of their perfection
I am desperate for acceptance
I want the reflection in my vanity mirror to stare back confidently
I want to be the girl that other girls want to be
But if the price is to look like everyone else, I won't pay it

I wouldn't trade my hair for a blonde wig
My hair is a crown that I can shape into anything
My skin doesn't need foundation from Sephora
My golden-brown tone shines on its own.
I roll my eyes at the kids in class
I walk in with confidence, my armor
My beauty rests with my creativity and kindness
I need acceptance from myself before the world
So I can love what was once a burden

— Heaven Harris, 8th Grade (2024 winner)

I'm smiling under my mask

I'm smiling under my mask

Inspired by “Say Thank You Say I’m Sorry” by Jericho Brown

Who is the girl with the orange and pink hair,
who I compliment every time I go through the Starbucks drive-thru.
I only ever see half of her face.

Who is the man who stands at the intersection
between Hollywood and Sheridan.
His suit coat and top hat, fitted with a plume,
always dapper and singing his own tune.

Who are the girls at the track meets,
always oversharing and bonding over nerves.
We exchange compliments and lace up our spikes,
becoming best friends for a fleeting moment before we sprint away.

Who was the father who sacrificed his shoe
for our volleyball, stuck high in the branches at the beach.
We could only thank him briefly— we had to
retreat back to our separate set ups to maintain distancing
in the pandemic.
All the interactions cut short and sweet,
I long for the day when we can openly embrace one another,
sharing smiles instead of elbow bumps.

But for now, we squint over our masks at the world,
like we need sunglasses to see the state of the
globe.

— Liliana Green, 11th Grade (2021 winner)

Competition Timeline, Process, & Rubric

The competition opens on January 1, 2026.

THE DEADLINE TO SUBMIT IS MAY 1, 2026.

Submissions are reviewed in two rounds:



First round: Illinois Humanities sends the entries, without the poet's identifying information, to a team of first-round reviewers. This team of 40+ judges includes working poets, poetry educators, past Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Award Winners, and Illinois-based students in Master of Fine Arts programs focused on creative writing and poetry. Those reviewers assign a score to each poem, and those scores are averaged to determine the top scorers from each grade.



Second round: The top 5 poems from each grade are sent on to a final judging committee. Second-round judges include Nora Brooks Blakely, educator and daughter of Gwendolyn Brooks, as well as representatives from the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago and Illinois Humanities. The judging committee selects two winners and one honorable mention for each grade.

WINNERS WILL BE NOTIFIED IN EARLY AUGUST 2026.

The 10th Annual Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards ceremony will take place at the Logan Center for the Arts at University of Chicago on Saturday, September 19th.

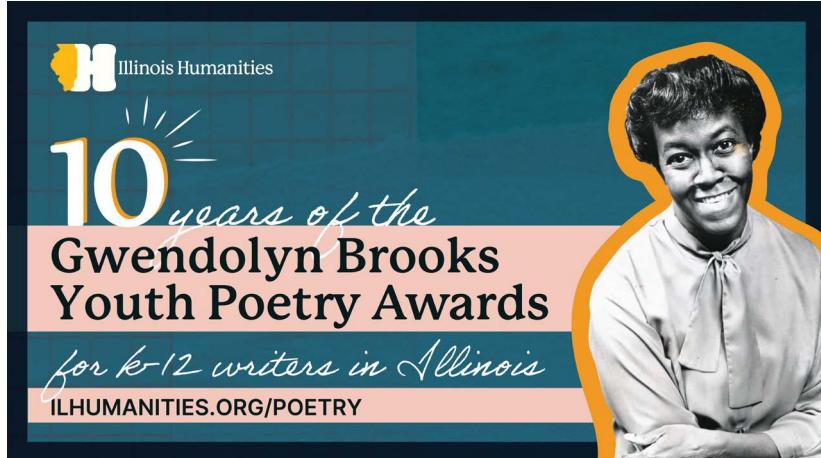
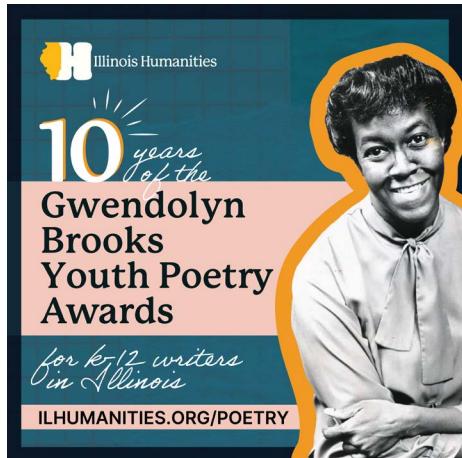


GWENDOLYN BROOKS YOUTH POETRY AWARDS SCORING RUBRIC

Question	1-2 points	3 points	4-5 points	Points Awarded
To what extent does the poet express emotional, intellectual, or imaginative proficiency to engage the reader?	The poem lacks emotional, intellectual, or imaginative proficiency and does not engage the reader.	The poem demonstrates some emotional, intellectual, or imaginative proficiency, but is not particularly engaging.	The poem is especially expressive and engaging.	out of 5
To what extent does the poet convey their own originality, whether through word choice, voice, theme, or observation?	The poem is unoriginal or clichéd.	The poem has elements of originality and personality but is ultimately lacking impact.	The poem could only be written by this author. It is fresh, original, and impactful.	out of 5
Does the poem present a clear theme or message?	The theme or message of the poem, if it exists, does not come through.	There is a theme or message, but it is unoriginal or clichéd.	The poem's themes or message come through clearly and are powerful and/or thought-provoking.	out of 5
How proficient is the poet in technical skill, such as using figurative language (imagery, metaphors, similes), poetic form (acrostic, sonnet, golden shovel, etc.), grammar, and word choice?	The poem's lack of technical proficiency is a significant distraction for the reader.	The poem demonstrates some familiarity with figurative language and/or form and an intention to use these technical skills.	The poem demonstrates an understanding of the technical aspects of poetry and applies it successfully.	out of 5
Total (This is your final score):				out of 20

Spread the word about the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards

Use these materials to encourage your students, family, and friends to enter the competition!



Download designs for web and social media by scanning the QR code or visit bit.ly/GBYPA26.

Print the following flyer and share it at your school!



10 Years of the

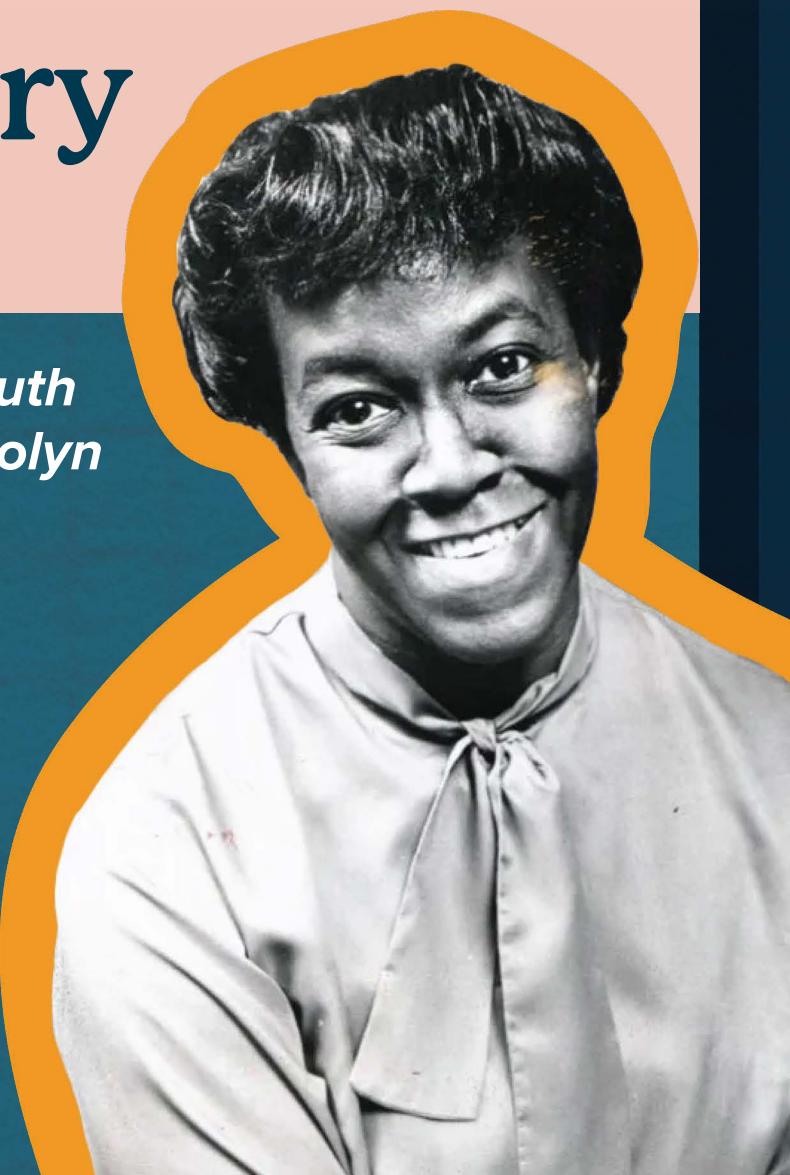
Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards

Celebrating the power of youth poetry and honoring Gwendolyn Brooks' enduring legacy

DEADLINE: MAY 1, 2026

Winning poets can receive up to \$300 in cash and other prizes! Students, their teachers, and their schools will be honored at an award ceremony in September 2026.

Visit [ILHUMANITIES.ORG/POETRY](https://ilhumanities.org/poetry) to submit your entry and download resources for writers and K-12 educators.



Presented by Illinois Humanities with support from



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES





Illinois Humanities

125 S Clark St #650, Chicago, IL 60603 | 312.422.5580
ILHumanities.org | @ILHumanities

The Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards are presented by
Illinois Humanities with support from

