

# NCTE WRITING AWARDS - 2001

The National Council of Teachers of English sponsors two writing award programs, the Promising Young Writers for eighth graders and the Writing Achievement Awards for eleventh graders. Each school nominates one or more students, based on enrollment. The students submit a best work writing sample and complete a two-hour impromptu writing based on a prompt provided by NCTE. More detailed guidelines, deadlines, and application forms can be found at [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org).

## PROMISING YOUNG WRITERS

*Bryan Balfanz*

Scott Highlands Middle School  
Apple Valley

*Katilyn Bouts*

Hopkins West Junior High School  
Hopkins

*Whitney Flohr*

Scott Highlands Middle School  
Apple Valley

*Katie Hawkinson*

Benilde-St. Margaret's Junior High School  
St. Louis Park

*Christine Liow*

Blackhawk Middle School  
Eagan

*Erin McLaughlin*

Blackhawk Middle School

*Erik Overlid*

Scott Highlands Middle School  
Apple Valley

*Hali Thurber*

Annunciation School  
Minneapolis

## WRITING ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

*Abigail Benson*

Armstrong High School

*Maria Bruun*

Wayzata High School

*Charlie Buffie*

St. Louis Park High School

*Mercedes Burns*

Richfield High School

*Jessica Burtness*

Coon Rapids High School

*Katherine Devlaminck*

Eagan High School

*Oksana Goldman*

Rosemount High School

*Jenna Le*

Edina High School

*Devin Markell*

Minnetonka High School

*Christy Melich*

Apple Valley High School

*Kelly Millner*

Champlin Park High School

*Robyn Salter*

Eastview High School

*Joshua Schirmer*

Brainerd High School

*Leigh Shadko*

Breck School

*Charles Worthington*

St. Louis Park High School

*Leah Yetka*

Cloquet High School

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Achievement Awards in Writing recognizes excellence in two types of writing produced by high school juniors. Students are nominated by English teachers from their own high schools in the late fall of their junior year. These papers are evaluated and ranked by teams of judges in each state, usually a college writing professor and a high school composition teacher. The highest ranking papers are sent to the National Council of Teachers of English for recognition. The application forms are available from NCTE in October. Excellent information as well as application forms are available on the NCTE web site [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org).

## IMPROMPTU TOPIC A—QUALITIES OF A HERO/HEROINE

Assume you have been invited as a guest editor to submit an article about "Heroes/Heroines of the New Millennium" to your school's newspaper or Web page. Write the article in which you present those qualities that, in your opinion, define a hero or heroine. Use your reading, own experience, and observations of others as your support.

### A NEW BREED OF HERO

MARIA BRUN. Wayzata High School, grade 11

When hearing the word hero, thoughts immediately go to great people such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. These three men are excellent examples of heroes from the past. In times of war, they stepped up and brought the nation to victory. Yet, there is a limited place for the war heroes of the past in today's society. With new problems to deal with, more is asked from a hero than ever before. No longer expected to just be a strong man with a gun, heroes are expected to have a delicate balance of strength, compassion, intelligence, and principle. As difficult as this balance is to achieve, there are examples of it seen every day.

Strength of character is vital to any hero. To gain the title hero, a person is generally put through a test. Determination, self-confidence, and faith in one's self are all need to pass the test. To see this kind of strength, one needn't look any further than someone overcoming a disability. Steven Hawking has been forced to go through so much to achieve what he has. Limited to a wheelchair and communication through a computer, Hawking has managed to become a leader in the field of astrophysics. The strength and resolve it took to achieve this is an inspiration to many. He is truly a hero to anyone who has had to overcome an obstacle.

A hero today not only has to demonstrate strength but also caring. Heroes are no longer the muscle men of old. A strong heart is just as important as a strong arm. Mary Jo Copeland has proved time and again that a gentle touch is just as powerful as a hard one. Copeland runs an organization called Sharing and Caring Hands. This organization provides meals, clothing, and shelter to homeless in the Minneapolis area. Copeland has dedicated her life to helping others. The caring and compassion that she gives every day is equal to what many of us give in a year. Not only does she run Sharing and Caring Hands,

Copeland has also built Mary's Place, a shelter for families and she has plans to build an orphanage. Copeland has dedicated her life to helping others, especially children. She has touched the lives of so many, not only those she helps, but those who help her as well. Her kindness makes her a hero.

Not all heroes are nationally recognized or devoted to others. Heroes are seen in the everyday world. From the child who uses humor to diffuse a tense situation at home to the police officer whose quick thinking saves the life of another, people have used intelligence to become heroes. The modern world has such complex problems that a person must use careful thought to make any decision.

A hero does what he or she does for many reasons. Many are inspired by their principles. It is difficult to stick to a principle when there are many opposed to you. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. are two examples that readily leap to mind when someone thinks of those who have fought against the majority, but they are only two of many. Every year, thousands of walkers turn out for the Minnesota AIDS walk. They raise money for the Minnesota AIDS Project. Believe it or not, many have received opposition from peers. Many people still see AIDS as a homosexual disease or they think the only people who contract it are those who live risky lives. By walking, people raise money for education and treatment. These people stand up to the opposition and support a cause that they truly believe in.

A new century comes with new heroes. These heroes will be very different from heroes of the past and many different from each other but one thing is sure. These people will show strength of character to stand up for what they believe in. They will demonstrate caring and willingness to serve others. They will use thought and careful planning to achieve what they dream.

## IMPROMPTU TOPIC A—QUALITIES OF A HERO/HEROINE

MEGAN EAGEN. John Marshall High School, grade 11

"With glory and passion no longer in fashion, the hero breaks his blade. . ." Kansas: Masque

With these simple lines, the Kansas rock band strives to epitomize what many feel today is the reality on heroism. No longer do we fight battles with only a sword and our wits to defend us. No grandiose ceremonies parade through the streets in celebration of an enemy defeated. Our literature, too, has altered significantly since the times of the mighty Hercules or the wise King Arthur. Newspapers and magazines have gradually replaced folktales and mythology to a point where many of these ancient heroes and heroines are scarcely remembered. Those silent paladins we read about today often have no super-human abilities, and tend to fight their battles in ignominy. Some may say that there are no true heroes in the modern world at all. Yet, in order to accurately draw this conclusion, one must first determine what qualities define a hero, which set him apart from his fellows.

"Cast the shadow long, that I may hide my face..." the song continues, though the words remain cryptic. Is public identification a necessary part of heroism, or merely a result? If one were to completely analyze all of the heroes ever recorded, he may or may not find this similarity. There are, however, a few common likenesses found in just about all heroic figures. The first and most obvious point would be that a hero must face some kind of problem or crisis. Also, this crisis cannot, in general, be something widespread or dealt with by a majority. As a brief example, a short story was published recently in the *Sky and Telescope* magazine about a young woman who was walking home one night. It was basically a personal response about how peaceful life on a star would be, as opposed to life in a city. The fact that the woman was looking at the stars does not make her a hero, despite how moving her paper may have been to those who read it. A second characteristic, which most definitely qualifies a hero, would be that he has to display some kind of moral strength or will when dealing with the given crisis. Hundreds of men and women fought for Civil Rights during the Seventies. Yet, a few names, Martin Luther King, Jr. in particular, stand out in our minds. Unquestionably, there had to have been others like him who also sacrificed their lives for the cause; why do they go unnamed? In many ways, Martin Luther King is a perfect example of a modern hero. Not only did he face a huge injustice, but he also took action with a greater moral effort and determination than could ever have been expected.

Archetypically, heroes are either born or gifted with some kind of superior power. Hercules had his incredible strength, Perseus, the magic sword of the nymphs, even the more recent Geronimo was believed to be impervious to bullets. Most people no longer believe in supernatural powers or abilities, though many of us would still seek them in one they might call a hero. What, then, could a modern hero possess that might replace the strength of a god or the wings of an eagle? In truth, most of the conflicts in our lifestyle no

longer require such physical prerequisites. With our growing technology, more and more men and women are acquiring jobs where one's brain, rather than brawn, is associated. Therefore, one could conclude that a hero today would possess above-average intelligence or, perhaps, heightened compassion. Such people may be the scientists who developed the human-genome project to help study illnesses like hemophilia or Down's syndrome.

A fourth and final characteristic displayed by almost every hero in history is that the person must have some kind of influence on either another individual, or a group. A classic example from the 13th Century would be King Arthur himself. As a man, he was reputedly not much to look at; yet some of Arthur's ideals, such as chivalry and respect, have survived the trial of time and become a part of society today. One cannot be a hero and remain isolated from humanity. Throughout history, people have looked to heroes and heroines for leadership and support, and neither one of these can be granted from one who does not make himself a part of his surroundings. This point is also somewhat connected with the second above, as one's moral character and judgment is shown the most strongly when dealing with a crisis in a public setting.

"Knowledge and reason change like the seasons." The song concludes with a statement that could not be closer to the truth. Where we once sought heroes whose mighty swords could cleave away the foes that surrounded us, we now study, in silence, those who face and overcome adversity today. Though the days of fire-breathing dragons and armies of the dead are over, nightmares do exist in other forms and wearing other masks. Some of the most dominant of these are disease, discrimination, and even loss of one's own moral up-holdings. Sometimes it seems that enemies surround us on all sides, and the only escape is to run and hide. Yet the world is filled with many silent heroes, and it is these people who have been our comforters and our guides in times of trial. They may not rise up on flying carpets, or even carry magic swords, but they travel amongst us to ease our burdens and offer their services.

## IMPROMPTU TOPIC A—QUALITIES OF A HERO/HEROINE

JENNA LE. Edina High School, grade 11

Arrow-tipped sunrays gilded the thirty-something man's vibrantly oily Russell-Crowe-length hair. The taut muscles of his arms rippled as he reached forward to tap the nametag propped on the corner of his desk. I looked at it. "James Swaggerton, Professional Twentieth-Century Hero," I read aloud.

"That's me," the handsome man assented with a smile that caused the bronze statues that were ranged in front of the plate-glass windows behind me to melt, chocolate-style, with infatuated sighs. I was less easily taken in.

Looking James Swaggerton straight in the eye, I remarked, "It looks like your nametag is a little out of date."

"That's okay. I'm going to go buy a new one at Kinko's this afternoon."

"No, no, what I mean is that you're out-of-date. The twenty-first century has arrived, pal, and that means that the definition for the word *hero* must be revised and modernized. And I have a feeling that twenty-first-century heroes and heroines will be less about brawn and buffoonery, salary and star-power, and more about heroism in the classical sense."

"Whaddya mean?" growled Swaggerton, jabbing an expensive cigar between his roughly chiseled lips.

"Well, let's think about it. What qualities do you think define a hero?"

"Swagger, sex appeal, a smoldering gaze, a photogenic body..." he recited automatically.

I groaned. "How I define a hero is a bit different, I'm afraid. First of all, I believe that a true hero must have an expansive vision. He or she must be able to see 'the big picture'..."

Swaggerton's face was getting red. My impertinence appeared to anger him. "Now, you look here, missy..." he interrupted.

"Secondly, a hero must be serene, not short-tempered," I continued as though I had not heard him. "He ought to save his anger for important issues — racism, homophobia, and sexual violence, to name a few — rather than exploding with ire whenever a reporter knocks on his door."

"So that's what you mean by *vision*? Not *vision* as in *television*?"

"No, I hear that many television actors (and rappers and football players) actually don't have much vision of their own."

"But what good is a vision if you don't have the guts to implement it?"

"A good point, Mr. Swaggerton. A hero must have the courage and initiative to actualize the ideals that he or she believes in. But remember: courage is not the same thing as Hollywood-style machismo. True courage is more subtle, more self-risking."

"Many of these athletes and singing sensations that we lionize today are not real heroes, in my opinion. It may be true that these celebrities courageously overcame many difficult obstacles on their path to greatness, but they were often motivated to do so by self-centeredness and greed for fame and money, not by love for mankind."

Swaggerton sneered. "Who believes in 'pure love for mankind' these days? It's not the Middle Ages anymore. In this modern world, it's each man for himself."

"Be careful, Mr. Swaggerton. You're letting your unheroic side slip more and more into plain view every minute. As for 'pure love for mankind,' why, it was embodied by numerous men and women of the most recent centuries! Take Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, who raised a banner for peace, freedom, equality, and a brotherhood of man. Or the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, who denounced religious bigotry and war crimes in the same breath. Those are only a few examples, but they clearly demonstrate that the early, innocent, revolutionary ideals of 'Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity' are certainly not dead."

Swaggerton raised his eyebrows incredulously. "Did you mention philosophers? Balderdash! Philosophers and intellectuals can't be heroes. They're too academic, cooped up in libraries all day long."

"Bertrand Russell was not. He gave charismatic lectures around the world, traveling on an exhaustively packed schedule."

"Well, you still haven't addressed my point that intellectuals can't be heroes because they're too academic and too idealistic. They don't belong to the real world."

"Many of them do, actually. But you bring up an important point, Mr. Swaggerton. A true hero must be a realist; he must not shut his eyes to the limited amount of resources and supporters that he has to live with."

"As for what you say about intellectuals, however, I believe that a hero must appreciate all the things that have the potential to help mankind advance: science, art, mathematics, music, friendship, love. And to be able to attach himself to these things, he must be sufficiently detached from power-lust and money-lust."

Swaggerton listened in sullen silence. "Is that all?"

"I know it's a lot..."

"It's far too much to ask from any one person! Who do you think is going to replace me if you get rid of me?"

"No one," I laughed. "I don't think much of this idea of giving heroes million-dollar offices that overlook New York City. The power might go to their head. The great thing about heroism is that anyone can attain a bit of it. We can all be a little bit heroic — just enough to be useful, not enough to be proud."

"I know a guy who risked losing his best friend by breaking her confidence so that she would get help for a dangerous health problem. A girl acquaintance of mine is always mediating arguments between her friends."

"Little things like that count, hmm?"

"That's what I believe."

"So this is what you came up to my office to tell me?" James Swaggerton, Professional Twentieth-Century Hero, mused aloud.

"Yeah. Also, to tell you that the police are coming by here any minute to get those bronze statues that you filched from the Metropolitan Museum of Art."

Swaggerton blanched.

## IMPROMPTU TOPIC B—TEEN PRESSURE/STRESS

Imagine that you have been invited by the school board to be part of a team chosen to help teens cope with stress and pressure. Write a letter to the group explaining how you balance the stress and pressures in your life.

### To the members of the school board:

How do I deal with stress? Hmm... an interesting query, especially considering I'm hardly sure I can deal with stress at all. However, I suppose the fact that you have taken the time to honor me with your recognition and the dually important fact that I am here and not in a mental hospital would tend to show that I am capable of answering this question.

I see my two most important coping methods for stress and pressure being a sense of humor and an ability to "move on." To fully explain the merits of the methods, I shall take you through scenes in my typical pressure-filled day to show you their effectiveness.

### ~ Morning

Breep

mmmphhh...

Breeeeeeeeep.

"...oh no... not again..."

"Good morning folks. It's 5:30 and this is J.P.-the-radio-slave with your morning weather report..."

"All right, all right, I'm up," I occasionally mutter to myself at the sound of the alarm for school in the morning. The stress of waking up at the bleary-eyed hour of 5:30 a.m. to, of all people, "J.P. the radio slave," is enough to frustrate anybody.

However, my thinking is: what good is it going to do for me to lie here on my back thinking about how badly I want to just roll over and go back to sleep if I know I'm just going to have to get up later and be even more pressed for time? Not a whole lot, I'll tell you. So I say — get past it, and move on. Because, once you've finally gotten yourself out of bed — what more is there to be stressed about? When you get over with it, the problem's out of your path, and you're free to move on.

### ~ Early morning

At my school, the time before classes begin is considered a time for major social gatherings. So, naturally, I seek out my friends, and more importantly, my "special friend" Andrew, who I'd kind of like to be more than friends with, if you know what I mean. Our exchange occurs like this:

Me: Hi! How are you?

Him: Pretty OK. I'm tired. You?

Me: Uh, yeah. Tired. Me, too.

Him: Hey, I've got to go talk to Christine. See you after social studies, OK?

Me: ... sure, I guess...

WHAT?! What kind of conversation is that? Of course, I'd like to go over and wring the neck of the next person I see — it's stressful trying to maintain some sort of social life, especially when boyfriends and almost-boyfriends and "guy-friends" are a part of the equation — but that would be hazardous to my health and theirs. Instead, I advocate countering the flaky conversationalist with a jovial, "Cool. See ya." Then STOP DWELLING ON IT. What good does it do to add stress by obsession over another person's most miniscule actions? It's better just to catch them later and voice your concerns than freak out.

### ~ Afternoon

It never fails.

Some days it's my parents, some days it is a counselor or teacher. Anyhow, one sidles up to me and says something along the lines of:

"Mercedes, you're just doing so well in classes that I'd thought I'd tell you about a new opportunity for you to..."

My first inclination, of course, is to go berserk, grab the person by the shoulders, and scream, "Don't you see I have enough to do already with six classes and the pressure to get A's in all of them, extracurricular activities, a social life, work, and getting enough sleep besides?! I'm not some kind of human draft animal!!

Of course, violence is never the best way to get leeway, but then neither is just accepting what everyone has in store for you. Therefore, I like to use my sense of humor to quell this stressful situation by saying, in a joking manner:

"Phew. I don't know. I've got a lot on my plate now. Could this wait?"

Making light of a situation that is stressful in nature helps in two ways. First it amicably shows the listener that you are experiencing some tough times. Second, a little humor makes the load of pressure lessen some because [pow!] suddenly things don't seem so bad.

My father always likes to say, in the morning, not "Have a good day" but "Make it a good day." Because how your day turns out really depends on your attitude and your coping style for stress. If one is able to neutralize and then get past the pressure, stress is no longer a "big deal."

Hope this helps.

Sincerely, Mercedes Burns

Richfield High School, grade 11



Unlike the Writing Achievement Award, there is only one prompt given for the impromptu writing for the Promising Young Writers award. The 2001 prompt asked the eighth graders: "If you were asked to name the most valuable thing you own that was not bought in a store, what would it be? Explain why it is valuable to you."

## PROMISING YOUNG WRITERS IMPROMPTU

WHITNEY FLOR, Scott Highlands Middle School, grade 8

I think the most valuable thing anyone can possess is an enemy. Not just a person with whom you argue, but a true enemy. A true enemy owns you the way you own them. Every action one of you makes, the other responds to. You are joined by strings, but you are both puppet and puppeteer. Enemies are the most precious things to have. They will show you how to deal with life.

My nemesis was Natalie. Almost for as long as I can remember, she's been there. At first we were friends, but that had been when we were too young to care about our differences. I knew her as completely as I knew myself. I never had any intention of using this knowledge to hurt her.

Neither of us meant to hate the other. We drifted apart for a time while we learned how the world worked. When we met again, we were too different and too stubborn to be friends.

Natalie was now one of the crowd. She needed people around her at all times to feel like herself. I felt that I lost my identity in the crowds she loved so much. We withdrew from each other.

I don't remember who made the first move. We both began to hurt each other. She used her place amongst our peers, and I used my intellect and nature. We ridiculed each other constantly, but we were not yet enemies.

Natalie crossed the line first. She still knew more about me than most people could hope to. She knew what I hated most about myself, and she announced these faults. What was particularly devastating about this blow was the people she told. She found those whose respect I wanted most, and told them.

It was then that Natalie became my enemy. It was then that I started to learn from her. She taught me about betrayal. I learned to cope with it and to understand it. From there, I learned to get over it. I did not forgive her for her lesson.

I struck back. I humiliated her in front of her friends; I drew tears from her eyes. I learned about guilt. I learned to avoid it in the first place. I learned not to go too far. I also learned how to ignore it if I

wanted to. I did not feel guilty for long about hurting her.

Natalie taught me many things in the years that followed.

She taught me about anger. I learned to control it, or even focus it. I found out how to quell it if I needed to.

She taught me to form alliances. With her friends backing her up, I was an easy target. I built and joined small groups when I needed protection. Natalie had forced me into society but outnumbering me. I learned to live with people and still be myself. I learned how to be happy in the company of others. She had taught me to make friends.

One of the most important lessons of the enemy is about you. Natalie brought out all my bad points. She showed me just how vengeful, hard-headed, and cruel I could be. Once I knew these things existed inside of me, I learned to hate and fear them. My enemy made me a better person.

She also exposed all of my weak points. She showed me exactly where I bled. I knew where to reinforce and protect myself.

Natalie helped me to define myself. My understanding of myself stems from her lessons. She taught me everything I needed to know about life before I entered high school.

We didn't attend the same high school, so we didn't see each other for a few years. We met again in college, and she had one more lesson for me.

When I saw her standing outside the science building, I called her name. After all those years of abuse, we smiled at each other. We even hugged before we parted ways again. We were no longer children, insecure about ourselves and needing an enemy. We were people who had gone down the same road.

Everything Natalie had done to me was overridden by the person she had become. She had taught me this last lesson: true forgiveness. For this, and everything you taught me, I thank you. My most precious enemy, I thank you.

## PROMISING YOUNG WRITERS IMPROMPTU

HALI THURBER, Annunciation School, grade 8

The tiny stitches lined each piece of cloth. Each stitch followed the other in a perfect row. My mother's delicate fingers slid the long silver needle back and forth along each patch.

As my mother laid her gaze upon me, she smiled. I could hear the sweet lullaby she often sang to me under her breath.

"When will it be done, Mom?" I remember asking in an urgent tone.

"Soon, Hali. I'm nearly finished."

I saw my mother tie the last knot, and cut the string a few minutes later. I couldn't wait to see the quilt. I was filled with so much energy that I jumped up and down with delight.

I watched her straighten up the room and carefully fold up the quilt. It had taken a little over two years for her to finish the quilt, and I had been nagging her about it ever since I could speak.

"Can I see it now, Mommy?"

"In a moment, Hal. Hold your horses."

She walked over to the table and lifted the quilt into her arms.

"Come upstairs. Let's see how it looks on your bed."

As we climbed the stairs, I couldn't take my eyes off it. We entered my room and she laid the quilt across the bed.

The intricate patterns and beautiful colors overwhelmed me. *My mom made that quilt just for me!* I thought to myself. I gave my mom a huge hug and I thanked her. Then I snuggled under the quilt and fell asleep.

The quilt my mother made for me is my most prized possession because she made it just for me and she put so much hard work into it. I really admire her because she never used a sewing machine once. Every small stitch she did by hand. Each one following the other in a perfectly straight row.

