



# 2026 World Citizen Essay Contest

RESOURCE GUIDE

FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, & PARENTS

**GET STARTED TODAY!**

Contest Rules

2026 Essay Prompt

Resources

Examples

& more!

**THIS YEAR'S PROMPT CENTERS,**  
**Democracy's Promise: Youth**  
**Reflections at 250 Years**

**75**

WORLD  
AFFAIRS  
COUNCIL

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## 2026 WORLD CITIZEN ESSAY CONTEST

**75**  
WORLD  
AFFAIRS  
COUNCIL

CELEBRATING THE  
250TH ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE UNITED STATES



Every voice matters. Together, we can learn  
from the past, face today's challenges,  
and imagine a stronger future.



# The 2026 World Citizen Essay Contest

## Getting Started Guide for Students

Compiled by: Ryan Hauck and Julianna Patterson

*The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were agreed upon by the United Nations in 2015 to address global issues by 2030. Their primary purpose is to improve the living standards of everyone and every country alike, with a focus on the longevity or sustainability of these improvements. These ambitious goals are all interconnected, but each focuses on a different field of development. The World Citizen Essay Contest provides the opportunity for youth to examine the SDGs in a meaningful and critical way. The SDGs are relevant to everyone around the world and generates a strong foundation for youth to think about and connect to global issues and the global community.*

### 2026 WCEC Essay Prompt:

In 2026, we mark two historic milestones: the **75th Anniversary of the [World Affairs Council](#) of Seattle** and the **250th Anniversary of the United States**. Both invite us to reflect on democracy—its promises, its challenges, and its future.

Since 1951, the World Affairs Council has worked to bring people together, strengthen understanding across differences, and prepare individuals for an interconnected world. Over the past 75 years, democracy has flourished in some places while facing challenges in others. In every community, democratic values are shaped by how people **participate, resolve disagreements, and build trust** with one another.

This year's **[World Citizen Essay Contest \(WCEC\)](#)** invites students in **grades 3–12 across Washington State** to add their voices to this important global conversation. The contest is a chance for young people to imagine, question, and share their ideas about the future of democracy, whether in their schools, neighborhoods, countries, or the world. **Families, educators, and communities** are encouraged to support students in developing their perspectives.

**In 1,000 words or less, respond to ONE of the following questions:**

- What role should global citizens play in strengthening democracy?
- How can local actions, whether in schools, communities, or neighborhoods, connect to global challenges facing democracy?
- What lessons from history can guide young people today in helping democracy remain strong?
- How can democracy help communities address shared challenges such as climate change, clean water, or sustainable growth, both locally and globally?

### ***Logistics:***

- ▽ The competition is open to all Washington state **[students in the 3rd-12th grades](#)**
- ▽ Essays must be **[1000 words or less](#)**
- ▽ Judging Rubric can be found on the **[2026 World Citizen Essay Contest page](#)**.
- ▽ Essays are due **by 11:59 PM PST on Monday, March 23rd, 2026.**





## 2026 World Citizen Essay Contest Rules

The World Affairs Council is proud to announce the 28th Annual World Citizen Essay Contest! This year, Washington State students in grades 3-12 are invited to respond to the following prompt:

This year's [World Citizen Essay Contest \(WCEC\)](#) invites students in grades 3–12 across Washington State to add their voices to this important global conversation. The contest is a chance for young people to imagine, question, and share their ideas about the future of democracy, whether in their schools, neighborhoods, countries, or the world. Families, educators, and communities are encouraged to support students in developing their perspectives. **In 1,000 words or less, respond to ONE of the following questions:**

- What role should global citizens play in strengthening democracy?
- How can local actions, whether in schools, communities, or neighborhoods, connect to global challenges facing democracy?
- What lessons from history can guide young people today in helping democracy remain strong?
- How can democracy help communities address shared challenges such as climate change, clean water, or sustainable growth, both locally and globally
- Looking ahead, what kind of democracy do you hope future generations will inherit 75 years from now?

### Essay Format and Length

Essays must be **1,000 words or less**, typed and double-spaced in Times New Roman 12 pt. font. Works cited pages and essay title do not count toward this limit. Please refrain from the use of pictures in the essay.

### Deadline and Submission

The World Affairs Council seeks to be as environmentally friendly as possible, so electronic submissions are **REQUIRED!**

Essays are due **Monday, March 23rd, 2026 by 11:59 PM PST**

Please complete the [Essay Submission Form](#) to submit your essay today!

**Do NOT include your name or school on your essay.**

Essays are judged anonymously, so we ask that NO identifying information appear in the essay. The electronic cover form will be used to identify your essay for WAC staff.

**IMPORTANT:** All essays submitted will be evaluated prior to judging, using AI detection tools. If your essay is found to have over **10% AI-generated content**, it will be disqualified from the competition.

### Judging and Criteria

A panel of judges will select the winning entries. They will use the criteria established on the rubric to evaluate entries according to three equally-weighted categories: content, word choice & voice, and organization & conventions. In addition, there will be a pass/fail works cited category.

**\*\*Please see the judging rubric for detailed information. It is suggested that you use the rubric to evaluate your essay before submitting.\*\***

### Works Cited

As appropriate to grade level, other's ideas and supporting information must be cited and clearly identified.

### Awards

Awards will be granted in each of the three categories: grades 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Winners will have an opportunity to attend an in-person award ceremony to receive a certificate, be recognized on the World Affairs Council website, and receive additional prizes.

**Questions?** Email [essaycontest@world-affairs.org](mailto:essaycontest@world-affairs.org) or call us at 206.441.5910 .

*The goal of the World Citizen Essay Contest is to promote discussion among students, teachers, families, and community members about the ways that individuals can effect positive change in the global community. This coincides with the World Affairs Council's mission to promote dialogue and debate about international issues of critical importance to our region and world.*

### **A Note on Learning Standards Presented in this Packet:**

Three sets of standards have been linked to each of the learning objectives in this packet. The **Washington State K-12 Social Studies Learning Standards** and the accompanying Grade Level Requirements are the social studies standards for WA State.

**The College, Career, & Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards** are the standards published by the National Council for the Social Studies. Guiding the packet as a whole is the Framework for Global Learning created by the Asia Society and the Council of Chief State School Officers titled *Educating for Global Competence: Preparing Our Youth to Engage the World* (2011).

Cross-objective standards are listed at the beginning of the packet, and content-specific standards can be found after each learning objective.

The standards provided have been selected for relevance, but are not exclusive: many other standards, such as Common Core, may be applicable to the resources and learning objectives identified in this packet. The intention for this packet's organization is to provide educators with an idea of resources available and possible uses for resources. Users should feel free to create their own learning objectives and to select resources according to the specific needs of their classrooms.

### **WASHINGTON STATE K-12 SOCIAL STUDIES LEARNING STANDARDS**

There are five EALRs in Social Studies, one for each of the discipline areas: civics, economics, geography, and history, and a fifth for social studies skills.

#### **(1) Social Studies EALR 1: CIVICS**

The student understands and applies knowledge of government, law, politics, and the nation's fundamental documents to make decisions about local, national, and international issues and to demonstrate thoughtful, participatory citizenship.

#### **(2) Social Studies EALR 2: ECONOMICS**

The student applies understanding of economic concepts and systems to analyze decision-making and the interactions between individuals, households, businesses, governments, and societies.

#### **(3) Social Studies EALR 3: GEOGRAPHY**

The student uses a spatial perspective to make reasoned decisions by applying the concepts of location, region, and movement and demonstrating knowledge of how geographic features and human cultures impact environments.

#### **(4) Social Studies EALR 4: HISTORY**

The student understands and applies knowledge of historical thinking, chronology, eras, turning points, major ideas, individuals, and themes on local, Washington State, tribal, United States, and world history in order to evaluate how history shapes the present and future.

#### **(5) Social Studies EALR 5: SOCIAL STUDIES SKILLS**

The student understands and applies reasoning skills to conduct research, deliberate, and form and evaluate positions through the processes of reading, writing, and communicating.

## COLLEGE, CAREER, & CIVIC LIFE C<sub>3</sub> FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL STUDIES STATE STANDARDS

The C<sub>3</sub> Framework is organized into the four Dimensions, which support a robust social studies program rooted in inquiry.

The four Dimensions are as follows:

- (1) Developing questions and planning inquiries;
- (2) Applying disciplinary concepts and tools;
- (3) Evaluating sources and using evidence;
- (4) Communicating conclusions and taking informed action

DIMENSION 1: DEVELOPING QUESTIONS AND PLANNING INQUIRIES	DIMENSION 2: APPLYING DISCIPLINARY TOOLS AND CONCEPTS	DIMENSION 3: EVALUATING SOURCES AND USING EVIDENCE	DIMENSION 4: COMMUNICATING CONCLUSIONS AND TAKING ACTION
Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Civics</li> <li>• Economics</li> <li>• Geography</li> <li>• History</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gathering and Evaluating Sources</li> <li>• Developing Claims and Using Evidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating and Critiquing Conclusions</li> <li>• Taking Informed Action</li> </ul>

### C<sub>3</sub> Framework Organization

Dimension 2 has four disciplinary subsections: (1) **Civics**; (2) **Economics**; (3) **Geography**; (4) **History**. Each disciplinary subsection has three to four additional categories, which provide an organizing mechanism for the foundational content and skills within each discipline.

CIVICS	ECONOMICS	GEOGRAPHY	HISTORY
Civic and Political Institutions	Economic Decision Making	Geographic Representations: Special Views of the World	Change, Continuity, and Context
Participation and Deliberation: Applying Civic Virtues and Democratic Principles	Exchange and Markets	Human-Environment Interaction: Place, Religions, and Culture	Perspective
Processes, Rules, and Laws	The National Economy	Human Populations: Spatial Patterns and Movements	Historical Sources and Evidence
	The Global Economy	Global Interconnections: Changing Spatial Patterns	Causation and Argumentation

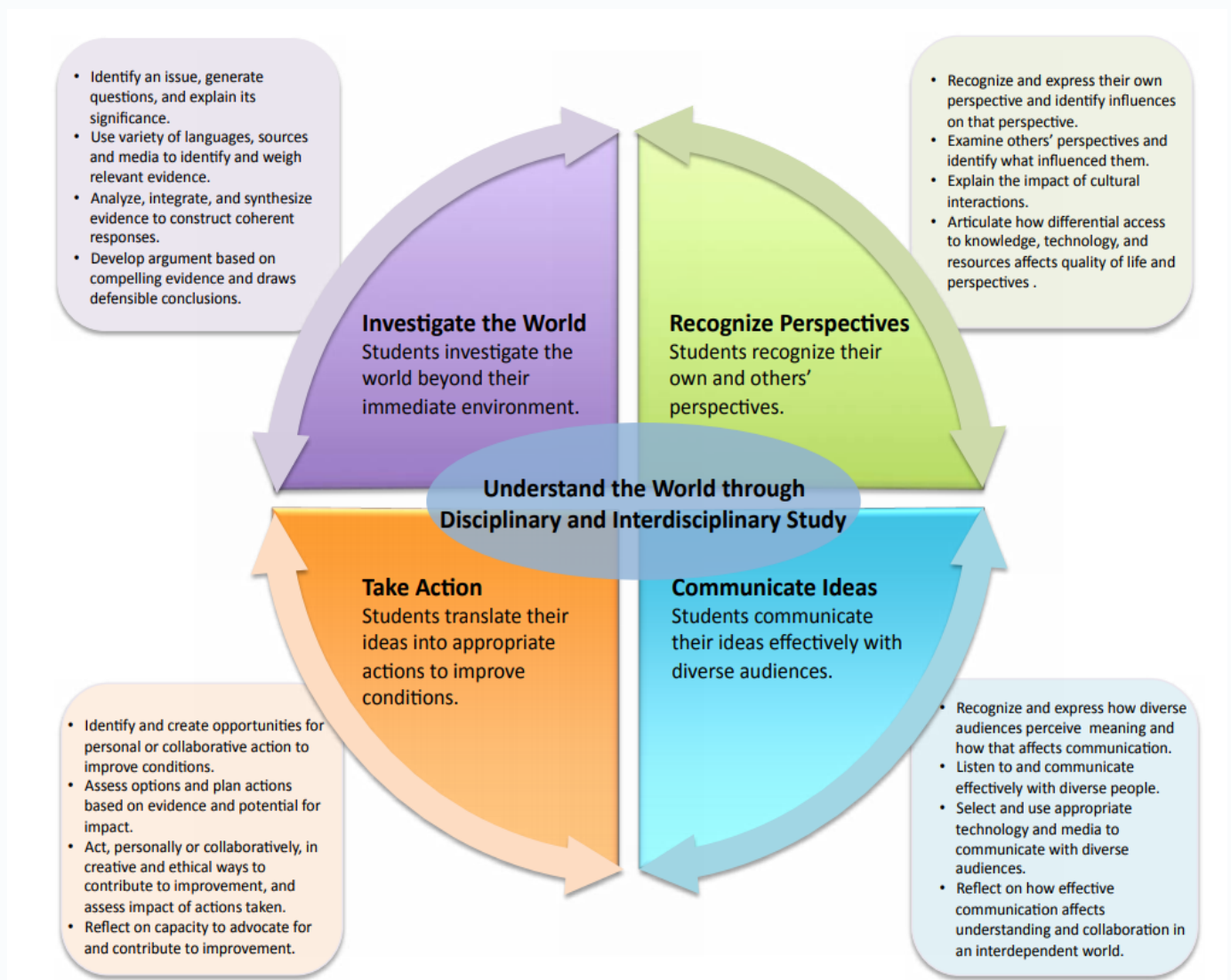
## EDUCATING FOR GLOBAL COMPETENCE

Frameworks taken from *Educating for Global Competence: Preparing Our Youth to Engage the World* (Asia Society and the Council of Chief State School Officers 2011).

**“Global competence is the capacity and disposition to understand and act on issues of global significance”** (Chapter 2).

Globally competent students are able to perform the following four competences:

1. **Investigate the world** beyond their immediate environment, framing significant problems and conducting well-crafted and age-appropriate research.
2. **Recognize perspectives**, others’ and their own, articulating and explaining such perspectives thoughtfully and respectfully.
3. **Communicate ideas** effectively with diverse audiences, bridging geographic, linguistic, ideological, and cultural barriers.



## Key Terms

**Declaration of Independence**: A historic document written in 1776 that announced the American colonies' freedom from British rule. It explains that all people have rights, like life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

**U.S. Constitution**: A written set of rules that explains how a government works and what rights the people have. In democracies, a constitution helps make sure leaders follow laws and protect people's freedoms.

**Democracy**: A system of government where the people have power—either by voting directly or by choosing representatives to make decisions for them.

**Representative Democracy**: A type of democracy where citizens elect leaders (representatives) to make laws and decisions on their behalf.

**Direct Democracy**: A form of democracy where people vote directly on laws and decisions, without choosing representatives to decide for them. (Britannica summary mentions this as a concept.)

**Voting**: Choosing someone or something by casting a vote—this is how people express their choice in elections.

**Majority Rule**: The idea that the choice supported by more than half of the people should win, while still respecting minority rights.

**Suffrage**: The right to vote in elections. (Related to democracy and mentioned in Britannica context.)

**Rule of Law**: The principle that everyone—including leaders—must follow the laws, and that laws are applied fairly and openly.

**Separation of Powers**: Dividing government into different parts (like lawmakers, courts, and leaders) so no single part gets too much control.

**Civil Rights**: Guarantees of equal social opportunities under the law, regardless of race, religion, or other personal characteristics and equal protection.

**Participatory Democracy**: is a system of governance that enables community members to have direct involvement in decision-making processes, going beyond traditional models of representation. Unlike systems where elected officials make decisions on behalf of their constituents, in participatory democracy, they involve residents by asking for input or feedback on draft decisions. This approach fosters a more engaged and informed community, ensuring diverse voices are heard and considered in policy formation.

## A Note on Articles and Paywalls

Some of the resources found within this guide require a subscription or other payment in order to be viewed. If you do not have free access to these resources through your home institution, you may be able to access them through the University of Washington's borrowing program for educators. To find out how to utilize this program, please follow the link below:

<http://www.lib.washington.edu/services/borrow/card/eligible>



# *Introduction to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*

The **17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, the successors to the Millennium Development Goals, were agreed upon by the United Nations in 2015 to address vital global issues by 2030. They are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and work toward peace and prosperity for all. This is a great place to begin research for your essay.

Although these ambitious goals are interconnected, each emphasizes a different area of development. To learn more about all 17 goals, please visit, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>.



## [Do You Know All 17 SDGs?](#)

This short video, provided by the United Nations, introduces all 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

## [Measuring Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals](#)

The Sustainable Development Goal tracker provides up to date data on each of the SDGs. Each SDG has its own tracking page, featuring interactive maps and charts displaying change and progress.

## [The Global Goals Debate](#)

This webpage includes a lesson plan for a classroom debate for student ranging from ages 8-18. This will help with conceptualizing the importance of taking action.



The following is a brief description of what the Sustainable Development Goals are and can be found at [www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment). This site, in addition to providing descriptions of each goal, provides related articles, videos, targets of each goal, and links for further information. This is a wonderful resource to begin your journey!

"The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. Learn more and take action."

**SDG 1** - No poverty

**SDG 2** - Zero hunger

**SDG 3** - Good health and wellbeing

**SDG 4** - Quality education

**SDG 5** - Gender equality

**SDG 6** - Clean water and sanitation

**SDG 7** - Affordable and clean energy

**SDG 8** - Decent work and economic growth

**SDG 9** - Industry, innovation, and infrastructure

**SDG 10** - Reduced inequalities

**SDG 11** - Sustainable cities and communities

**SDG 12** - Responsible consumption and production

**SDG 13** - Climate action

**SDG 14** - Life below water

**SDG 15** - Life on land

**SDG 16** - Peace, justice, and strong institutions

**SDG 17** - Partnerships

**16** PEACE, JUSTICE  
AND STRONG  
INSTITUTIONS



**17** PARTNERSHIPS  
FOR THE GOALS



## *How the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Support Democracy*



### [Drive for Democracy \(Sweden & UN\)](#)

This project shows how countries can make democracy stronger by protecting free speech, fair elections, and equal rights. It connects to **SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**. **Why it matters for students:** It explains why voting, having fair news, and respecting human rights help people's voices be heard.

### [Stronger Governments = Stronger SDGs \(UN Report\)](#)

For the world to reach the UN goals, governments need to be fair, open, and honest. The report highlights that when leaders listen to people and follow the rules, communities do better. **Why it matters for students:** It shows that democracy isn't just about elections—it's also about making sure leaders are accountable and treat people fairly.

### [Community of Democracies – Linking SDGs to Democracy](#)

A global network that connects the UN goals to democracy. It shows that things like equal rights for women (**SDG 5**), fair justice systems (**SDG 16**), and countries working together (**SDG 17**) are key for strong democracies. **Why it matters for students:** It helps students see how democracy is about fairness for *everyone*, not just in one country but around the world.

# *How the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Support Democracy*

## [York University – Teaching Toolkit: Government & Politics](#)

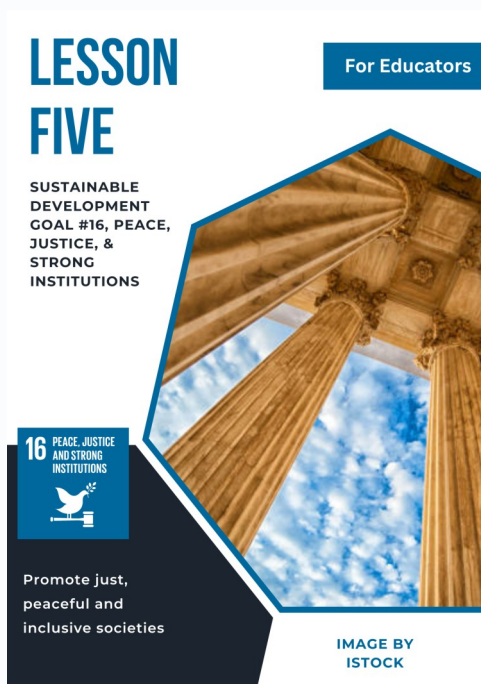
A set of classroom lessons that connect the SDGs to real issues in government and democracy. Students can explore how to make societies more fair, reduce inequality, and protect human rights. **Why it matters for students:** It gives teachers ready-to-use activities to help students learn how the SDGs support democratic values in their own communities.

## [Lesson Five | SDG #16 Peace, Justice, & Strong Institutions](#)

In this lesson from the World Affairs Council of Seattle – Global Classroom Program, students learn about United Nations Sustainable Development Goal #16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. Students will engage in a series of individual and collaborative learning activities that prompt them to reflect on the concepts, peace, and justice, and how they are important to creating stable and inclusive societies. Students will work in small groups to assess how societies can enhance civic engagement, representative decision-making, and protect individual and collective freedoms.

## [Lesson Seventeen | SDG #17: Partnerships for the Goals](#)

In this lesson, students will explore United Nations Sustainable Development Goal #17: Partnerships for the Goals. Students will engage in a series of individual and collaborative learning activities to better understand how all the UN SDGs can be better achieved through collaborative planning, investment, and action.





# *Global Perspectives on Democracy*

## Suitable Across Grades

### [Civitas Lessons on Democracy](#)

The Civitas Lessons on Democracy are a collection of lessons for young people from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. The twenty-nine lessons and units of study in this collection provide an international perspective on basic concepts of democracy and engage students in activities that develop skills in critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. The lessons focus on the concepts of the Foundations of Democracy curricular program: authority, justice, privacy, responsibility, and rights.

### [PBS – The Power of Deliberative Democracy](#)

An engaging **8-minute PBS segment** featuring Ari's exploration of how deliberative democracy works worldwide. It highlights France's citizen conventions and how participatory approaches can empower communities and influence government decision-making.

### [Thank You Democracy Podcast – Global Democracy Coalition](#)

A compelling series spotlighting stories from youth leaders, activists, and changemakers worldwide. It brings democratic values to life through narratives of resilience, innovation, and civic action—showing that democracy truly is more than institutions.

### [Voices of Democracy – Resource Guide \(Grades 8–12\)](#)

A downloadable guide presenting **deliberative themes**—including citizenship, international relations, freedom of speech, and human rights—in age-appropriate, classroom-ready lessons aligned with Common Core standards. Excellent for high school civic education.

### [PBS NewsHour Lesson – Reinventing American Democracy](#)

This lesson encourages students to engage with current debates about democracy in America. Using research from Pew and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, students analyze proposals for democratic reform and stage a mock constitutional convention to practice civic dialogue and decision-making.

### [Democracy and Civic Engagement Lesson Plans](#)

A set of **five lessons** exploring democracy & civic engagement through personal stories and oral history. Students learn not just about voting or government structure, but how community voice, belonging, resistance, and action work in real life. The final lesson has students carry out an oral history project themselves.



## ***A Reminder of The Prompt:***

In 2026, we mark two historic milestones: the **75th Anniversary of the [World Affairs Council](#) of Seattle** and the **250th Anniversary of the [United States](#)**. Both invite us to reflect on democracy—its promises, its challenges, and its future.

Since 1951, the World Affairs Council has worked to bring people together, strengthen understanding across differences, and prepare individuals for an interconnected world. Over the past 75 years, democracy has flourished in some places while facing challenges in others. In every community, democratic values are shaped by how people **participate, resolve disagreements, and build trust** with one another.

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- Looking ahead, what kind of democracy do you hope future generations will inherit 75 years from now?

**IMPORTANT:** All essays submitted will be evaluated prior to judging, using AI detection tools. If your essay is found to have over **10% AI-generated** content, ***it will be disqualified from the competition***. Please ensure that your work is **original and authentic**! We will be using the following AI detection tools to pre-screen essays before sharing with our 2026 judges,

[Grammarly](#)

[GPTzero](#)

***Your Perspective Matters! Share your vision for democracy's future!***

For examples of successful submissions? Check out our past World Citizen Essay Contests and winners, [here](#)! We are excited to have youth across Washington State participate and speak on issues important to them and to the world. Again, the judging rubric for the competition can be found on the [2026 World Citizen Essay Contest Page](#).