

ONE BOOK
TWO BOOK

WRITE OUT LOUD
[celebrate creative writing]

IOWA CITY
UNESCO
CITY OF
LITERATURE

WRITE OUT LOUD

— Student Writing Awards —

A Celebration of Young Writers

2026

Iowa City • UNESCO City of Literature

Write Out Loud!

February 22, 2026

The Write Stuff winners

Pieces are recognized for their language, clarity, structure, and emotional impact.

Talia Keck, 1, Wickham Elementary
Rayaan Dutta, 2, Willowwind School
EllaJane Rex, 3, Hoover Elementary
Nidhi Saha, 4, Horn Elementary
Vance Van Daele III, 5, Willowwind
School

Elsa Dietrich, 6, Clear Creek
Amana Middle School
Rosanna Yang, 7, Northwest Middle
School
Lorelei Rex, 8, Southeast Middle
School

From the Heart winners

Pieces are recognized for their creativity, passion, and expressiveness.

Sophie Lathrop, 2, Willowwind
School
Aadhya Iyengar, 2, Willowwind
School
Xiang Grace Lei, 3, Lincoln
Elementary School
Ayla Keck, 4, Wickham Elementary

Lena Hadlandsmyth, 5, Horn
Elementary
Ben Ayers, 6, Willowwind School
Sara Vergara-Vanegas, 7, Southeast
Middle School
Mazzy Sleep, 8, Home school

Honorable Mention

These students' work was deemed to be of excellent quality.

Henry Rager, 1, Willowwind School
Hazel Lindley, 2, Garner Elementary
Hazel Johnson, 3, Clear Creek
Elementary
Emery Stoll, 3, Weber Elementary
Sky Olivier, 4, Willowwind School
Maeve Lyons, 4, Willowwind School
August Parkinson, 5, Mann
Elementary
Charlie Mangano, 5, Longfellow
Elementary

Lazarus Erickson, 6, Northwest
Middle School
Emily Ding, 7, Northwest Middle
School
April Xu, 7, Northwest Middle
School
A'KiraEpps, 8, Southeast Middle
School
Miranda Zimmerman, 8,
Scattergood Friends School

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ACT Writing Evaluation Team

John Melby-Oetken, team lead
Tara Acton
Alyssa Asquith
Danielle Benesh

Chris Dolle
Renee Kelly
Roxanne Swim

Margo – A Dog’s Tale

Hi, my name is Margo. I was born in Texas, but my family found me at an adoption center in Iowa. They have two kids, Talia and Ayla. They are so cute and I love spending time with them, especially when they play with me outside. When I come back inside, I’m so excited that my paws slide across the floor and I look like a fish on land.

In my new home, I have a snake toy with lots of noisy squeakers; it’s my favorite! I also enjoy gnawing on my antler; it has really helped me channel my puppy chewing instincts.

The first time I saw fluffy white stuff falling from the sky, I didn’t know what to think of it. I was scared to go in it, but Ayla and Talia helped show me that I could have fun in it. Now, I enjoy running around in the snow, even when it comes all the way up to my belly. I don’t have very long fur, though, so sometimes I get cold in the winter. Thankfully, my family got me a nice warm pink coat that helps me stay warm.

I’ve only been with my family for half a year, but I already feel so loved and know I have found my forever home.

Weird Animals

No it couldn't be a cat,
Because it has to be a bat.
No it couldn't be a cat,
Look at that long tail.
It has to be a whale.

No it couldn't be a fox,
Because it has to be hawks.
No it couldn't be a fox,
Look at that short tail like a pug.
It has to be a very big bug.

No it couldn't be a swan,
Because it has to be a little fawn.
No it couldn't be a swan,
Look at that big nose.
It has to be crows.

No it couldn't be a deer.
Because it has to be a steer,
No it couldn't be a deer,
Look at that little eye.
It has to be a fly.

Read

Running is good for you.

Egypt is ancient.

At the port lots of ships come in.

Drawing builds your creativity.

My Great Cookie

My cookie is as golden as a beam of sunshine. The bumps are like tall mountains in the air. I smell chocolatey homemade warmth as I sniff the air, I hear soundless crackling as I break it in half. I taste the chocolatey melted delicious cookie as I take a bite. My cookie feels as polished as a smooth window. My cookie makes me feel as peaceful as I can be. My cookie makes me feel like a statue in the night. I feel like an angel with the sunlight.

Oliver the Author

There once was a turtle that lived in the ocean. His name was Oliver. Oliver loved to write. He wrote stories all the time. Oliver liked science, too, though. Often, Oliver wrote about science. One day, when Oliver had just started school, he brought a book he was working on to school. Its title was: "The Super Smart Scientist!" But when it was time for story time, he forgot to put his book away. After story time, one of his classmates, Rody, spotted his book. He read the first few pages. Oliver saw Rody. "Hi Rody," Oliver said when he got to his desk. "Do you like my book?"

"No. Your book is bad. Plus, all the science you wrote isn't true. Your drawings are bad, too. You didn't color in the lines."

"No, it's not bad!" yelled Oliver.

"Shhh, Oliver, no yelling," said his teacher.

"Ha!" Rody said, not as loud. Then, Rody lined up for lunch.

As Oliver grabbed his paper bag, he thought about his book. And it was true. Oliver didn't research all that he wrote, and he didn't color in all the lines, but did that matter?

"Yes," he thought, "that did matter. It mattered a lot. So if I keep writing stories and they're all bad and they won't get published, then basically, I'm wasting a bunch of time," Oliver thought, as he pulled out a PB and J sandwich and a juice box from his paper bag. So, Oliver decided to never again write a book.

It was pretty hard to start. Oliver touched his pencil to his paper once or twice, but after that, he got the hang of it. He didn't write a book for two years.

But one summer, when Oliver was going through his backpack, he saw a few crumpled papers all stuck together. It was an old book. Oliver started to read. Then he remembered Rody. Oliver then wrote a book that taught the lesson that someone should never boss you around or tell you that something is wrong with your book. Then, he entered it in a book contest, and it got published.



The Ghost Cat and a Child's Arts at Midnight

I was walking down the empty hall, when I heard a sound that came from the wall.
I heard a ghost that was booing, then I heard an owl hooting.
I am so afraid of the dark! Then the swing began to move by itself at the park.

Then something glided in front of me. I thought it was something mean to see.
Its head was Pete the Cat. At first, I thought it was a giant bat.
It floated by without a sound. Its tail curled up and spun around.

It said, "Hello, I'm Captain Boo! I'm a ghost, that is true! But don't be scared, I'm nice, not mean.
My favorite food is baked beans." "What is your favorite food?" asked the ghost.
"Oh! My favorite food? Probably toast."

I once danced in Beijing Zoo. Oh, I saw Mickey Mouse wanting to photograph a cute panda eating bamboo.
It stood up tall like me or you, and wore beautiful ballet shoes, a pair of two.
It floated up and gave a spin—"can I stay and dance within?"

It meowed with a ghostly smile, and danced around in cat style.
She showed me how to rise and bend, to point my shoes and softly send.
A piano played so sweet and low, as if Chopin began to flow.

I once danced here so long ago, beneath the stars, the moon aglow.
I missed the music, the stage, the light, so I returned one starry night.
I showed her some of my arts, I said, "each picture shows my heart."

I paint with color, shapes, and lines. The frame of my portrait shines.
This one is a swirling, starry sky, like Van Gogh's dreams that never die.
"And this is Claude Monet!" I said with pride. Soft water lilies bloom, the colors glide.

The world feels calm, kind, and fair, with soft dance flowing through my hair.
She twirled and leapt through a drifting snow, her steps a gentle, graceful flow.
She looked at Monet's Bridge and Sun, and whispered, "You and I are one."

"Art lives in many forms," she said, "In paint, in dance, in music's thread."
When the clock struck half past two, the ghost cat sighed, "We must be through."
She floated back and waved goodbye. I missed my ghost cat and started to cry.

So now, when moonlight fills the air, I feel her dancing gently there.
And sometimes when I'm tucked in tight, the room comes alive with softest light—
With memories of paint and song, of dance and friendship all night long.
We paint, we twirl, and shape the night—A ghost, a child, and art's pure light.

Limited Steps

I was at school on a Monday when something strange happened. All of a sudden, the intercom rang, and the whole classroom went quiet. Everyone looked around, confused. I remember thinking, *Why would the principal talk to us on a Monday? Nothing special ever happens on Mondays.*

Then our principal started speaking. She said, “Good morning,” but her voice sounded serious. She told us that what she was about to say might be hard to understand. That’s when I got a really uncomfortable feeling in my stomach.

She announced that starting that day, students would have a limit on how many steps they could take at school—not at home, just at school. By steps, she meant *every single step we walked*: from our classroom to the bathroom, down the hallway, to the cafeteria, and even at recess.

To keep track, we were each given a special watch to wear at school. The watches counted our steps and were connected to the teachers’ and principal’s computers. Then she said the number.

Only 1,000 steps per day.

The principal didn’t give a long explanation. She just said the school wanted to help students learn self-control and responsibility. Walking calmly, she said, was part of being respectful and safe—and now, every step would count.

Suddenly, everything felt different. If someone ran in the hallway, the watch would know. If someone took extra steps just to fool around, the watch would know. Even walking too much for no real reason could get you in trouble. I started thinking, *What if I waste my steps before lunchtime? What if I don’t have enough left for recess?* Every step felt important now.

Then I felt someone shaking me. I heard a loud beeping sound. I opened my eyes and saw my mom standing over me, turning off my alarm clock. It was 7:00 a.m., and she was waking me up for school. That’s when I realized—it had all been a dream.

But when I got to school that real Monday, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. The dream was kind of funny, but it also taught me something important. In real life, we don’t have step limits. We don’t have word limits. And we don’t walk around thinking about how many heartbeats we have left. But the truth is, we do have limits—we just don’t notice them.

We only realize how valuable something is when it’s almost gone. That’s when we start paying attention and choosing more carefully. I realized that life is a lot like that dream. We can’t do everything. We can’t say yes to everything. We have to decide what really matters, because every day we are spending our time, our energy, and our attention—just like steps.

So maybe the lesson isn’t about limiting ourselves. Maybe it’s about prioritizing. Choosing what deserves our steps, our words, and our time. That day, I became grateful for every step I take, every word I speak, and every heartbeat I feel. Life is made up of small, everyday gifts, and when we notice them, even an ordinary Monday can feel important. From now on, I decided I won’t take things for granted. I’ll slow down, pay attention, and choose what really matters—one step at a time.

Love From Within

Sometimes I doubt myself.
Wonder if I am enough.
Smart enough. Strong enough. Capable enough.
I don't think I can do it.
I can't do it. I just can't.
Then I feel the warmth of arms coming around me,
Encircling me, shutting out the noise,
And know that my family is there for me,
And they love me just the way I am.
I stay there, in that moment, loving it.
I begin to think that maybe I am.
Smart enough. Strong enough. Capable enough.
That I can do it.
That I can do anything.

Summer Camp

On our approach to the campground,
my father slows the car to a glide—
As if he wants one more minute alone with me,
as if he fears I might miss him.
My father names all the trees.
“Juniper. Larch. Oak.”
The woods rise around the campground like giants
guarding us from lurking creatures.
A scent of rain and smokey ash surrounds me.
My heart begins beating like a bobcat’s,
just before he strikes.
I leap on to the spongy ground.
My backpack bites my shoulders.
My grandpa’s army duffel drags behind me,
heavy with ghosts and ancient stories.
I move turtle-slow like my grandpa did as he got older.
My father finds Cabin 140.
I memorize the number, embossed in shiny steel.
For a moment, my face floats there in the mirrored surface.
I give my dad’s hand one last squeeze.
It feels like a well-worn catcher’s mitt— soft, but firm.
I wonder who my cabinmates will be,
and if any of them will snore.
I spot a bottom bunk, empty and waiting.
I unzip my bag—clothes erupt, a mushroom cloud of chaos.
My dad laughs and takes a picture.
Soon the cabin fills.
Blankets, voices, the smell of wet shoes.
Our counselor claps, loud as thunder
Grabbing attention like a performance
“Dinner time!” he calls.
Together we dash into the rain,
drops splattering our faces.
I don’t even notice my father’s gone,
vanished quietly into the night.
As dinner arose the voices grew more like family.
Back in my bunk, the sheets are soft and warm.
The forest sways and creaks;
Insects whisper their tiny secrets.
I tell myself I’m not afraid.
My eyes blink and close.
The world tips forward, and I slide into sleep
— as if settling into a bed of soft snow.

Chipper and the Barking Breakout

Dry, tasteless, and cheap are all words I would use to describe the food here at the pound. A one-fourth cup is all they feed us. From the Great Danes, like myself, to tiny Chihuahuas we all get the same. As the bowl of food is placed in my kennel I think to myself, why am I here? Why did my owners really get rid of me? I vaguely remember the day I was brought here. It was a snowy and all I did was sit down next to the human child. He started sneezing like crazy. The rest of the day was a blur. The man took me into the car looking genuinely sorry for me as the boy wept and begged the man not to take me. Even though she was putting on a brave face, I could see a few tears in the woman's eyes.

My thinking is interrupted by a loud yowl from the small gold and brown mutt down in cage twenty-two. I guess it's her turn. A sharp sadness with a hint of fear pangs me. I see her quivering in the cage being held by the grumpy man. I know my turn is coming soon. I might be thinking about my old family, or seeing that poor mutt being carried away, but a sudden thought enters my brain. We have to break out. And we have to do it tonight.

Later that day they let us outside in the back to play. While I was laying under a tree I noticed Dagger, the pound's most notoriously grumpy dog, laying in a patch of wet grass. I also know that he has a loose lock on his kennel. One good push and the door to his kennel could open. The man always has to close his door twice. I pace over to where Dagger is sprawled on the ground. "Hey Dagger! What's up?" I bark cheerfully yet casually. "What do you want Chipper?" he growls in reply. "Listen," I begin, "I happen know you have a loose lock on your cage. If you were to bust your cage open and break me out I can free the whole pound! I could get you a dog treat in return." "Well," he grumbles, "a dog treat would be nice. Fine, make it two and I'll help you." "Deal!" I bark excitedly. I'm relieved he actually agreed.

As soon as it's dark out and all the lights are off in the pound, I put the next phase of my plan into action. "Tiny," I bark softly, "listen, I need you to get me a dog treat. And remember you owe me." My friend Tiny the chihuahua has a space on both sides of her cage where the dogs before us had bent it up, and since she's on the end she can stick her head under and grab a treat. "What do you need?" she barks in reply. "Two dog biscuits," I bark. She slips her head under and grabs the treats out of the bag which is carelessly laid on its side. "Dagger" I bark across the aisle "I have them." Dagger turns around, squares up to the cage, and with a hefty grunt kicks the door open! Then he comes over to my cage and pushes the lock to the side! We run up and down the aisle freeing everyone we pass. What a rush! I've never felt so alive! Once everyone is out we all run over to the large vent and with a huge thrust of my legs the panel falls out. Tiny leads everyone out while I go at the very back to make sure no one is left behind. Once we get to the end of the tunnel Dagger steps in front of Tiny and kicks the panel off. And then finally we're free. But this is a totally different type of free. I hadn't thought this far ahead. Is this what I really want? But, I guess that's okay, to sometimes not know what you want. The fresh pine air is a gift to my nose I never thought I'd get. As we run downhill I look around at the dogs who have become my family. When we get to the bottom they all turn to me, they want me to lead.

CHAPTER 1 FROM THE PURGE

“Look at this,” Chanel spun her phone towards Collen, “A ‘Purge’ alert! Who would actually believe that?” Chanel chuckled to herself.

“Well,” Collen replied, adjusting his jacket, “Lots of people are *convinced* it’ll happen someday.”

The old grandfather's clock rang once, twice, and once more.

Chanel groaned, “Great,” she muttered, “Class started.

She grabbed her faded blue backpack and bolted towards the door, sneakers squeaking against the polished floor. Collen followed close behind, nearly tripping over a loose rug as they burst through the door.

The campus was eerily quiet as Chanel and Collen made their way to the lecture hall.

“You think anyone will notice we’re late?” Collen asked, the corners of his mouth lifting up in a smile.

“Well, what do you think, genius?” Chanel shot back, smirking.

They rounded the corner - and froze. Ace Wallance stood propped up against the wall, arms crossed. Dubbed the school’s “neck breaker”. Chanel’s ex.

“Hey tweeb!” Ace sneered, jerking his chin towards Collen, “Yeah you, c’mere!”

Collen took a hesitant step forward. That was all Ace needed. He lunged. Collen barely had time to flinch before Chanel shoved him to the side. Ace’s fist sliced through the empty air, the force carrying him off balance. His shoe squealed against the floor as he stumbled, barely catching himself.

“Back off, Ace,” Chanel snapped, stepping between them. Her heart hammered violently, but she stood her ground.

Ace straightened, laughing low and ugly. “Still playing hero, Chanel? Thought you’d grown out of that.” His gaze dropped to her hand. The phone screen had lit up, glowing harshly in the dim hallway. Ace’s jaw tightened as he read it. Collen looked over Chanel’s shoulder, his breath hitching.

EMERGENCY ALERT:

THE PURGE COMMENCES AT 5:30

ALL CRIMES WILL BE LEGAL FOR 72 HOURS

“Ok, this is getting out of han-” The words died in Chanel’s throat.

A blaring alarm tore through the air - not the familiar class bell. No, this one was deeper, harsher. The lights overhead flickered, plunging the hallway into flashes of yellow and white. Ace’s smirk faltered. Then came the sirens. *Dozens* of them. Students poured from classrooms, screams echoing off the walls. Some ran. Others froze. Teachers shouted useless commands, their voices swallowed by the rising panic.

Chanel’s instincts screamed at her. She shoved her phone into her pocket, “We should go.”

Collen grabbed her wrist, eyes wide, “Dorms are too far, Chanel.”

She scanned the chaos, pulse racing, “Then we find someplace else.”

Another scream rang out - closer this time. And whatever safety the campus once promised was already gone.

My Garden

Peppermint in the air
Herbs cover everywhere
Soon, I will have picked them all

The ivy twists and turns
Like a sly snake
Slowly, I walk down the path, laden with pebbles
Fuzzy catmint brushes my arms

Gradually leaves fall,
Like colorful snowflakes
Some land in my hair
Beauty beyond compare

I pick up a single red leaf...
Inspecting it
A tiny insect
A perfect fit for my garden

Now I must leave
Fresh berries await me
But nothing says autumn like tea
And a cookie
Then I really know that this is fall

Buried City

take the city of light
the city built of hopes and dreams
a city that rises as far as sight
and...

tear it down, wish by wish
break the foundations of childhood reminiscences
crack and chip the road to tomorrow
dig up all the buried sorrows
twist daydreams into haunting nightmares
blur familiar faces into ones that don't care
collect the morals and lessons learned
snip the connections to family and friends
plunder the heart of gold, the helping hand
and
watch
all of it
burn

pile the ashes and wreckage high
taller than the bright blue sky
a twisted mountain of bitter thoughts and wallowing hate
in a barren field of cooling ideas and whispers of far, far, too late

all that is left is one lonely willow tree
a willow tree that weeps
for what could've been, should've been, would've been
for lost humanity

snow drifts downward
burying the evidence under a sheet of white
piling higher and higher
erasing everything from memory

the tree drops its leaves

but it isn't dead
it is only awaiting a distant spring

THEY ARE WATCHING

They are watching
Every message, every call
Even the movies and videos you see
If you talk, they hear you
If you walk, they see you
When you think you are alone, they are in the room with you
They are the alarm that wakes you up in the morning
They are the answer to every question you ask
They are the annoying vendor, the cashier, the artist nextdoor
They know what you want, when you want it, why you want it
They know you better than you think you know yourself
Careful, for they know who you are
Careful, for they know where to find you
Careful, for all your secrets are theirs
Careful... For they are watching

Horses of the Sea

They were said to be horses of the sea. I didn't know what that meant at first. I do now. The mist was rising from the sea early one morning, recoiling from the cold water. There was a salty smell in the air, as there always was when you were down by the water. Genna had snuck out early, when the velvety sky was clear and cold, encrusted with chips of diamond and the milky way was a sparkling band of lavender and pearly blue in the endless black. She ran barefoot through the small wood behind her house, light on her feet. Soon the trees thinned, and she could feel coarse sand under her feet and see moonlight glinting off of the water in the distance. Genna flew down the gentle slope to the water. The sand grew finer and paled in color until it was the same shade and consistency as powdered sugar. Small, foamy waves lapped at the smooth shoreline, and there was a distinct water line where warped strips of black cherry bark, pebbles, and tiny seashells had washed up and accumulated. The horses were there, she knew, just beyond the shadows, even though she couldn't see them yet. Elixir said so. "They like the morning best," he'd whispered with fierce conviction. "How do you know?" Genna had asked doubtfully. Elixir's response, per usual, was irritatingly brief yet accurate: "It's when the horses come up from the sea." Genna didn't ask any confirming questions, knowing that Elixir would only supply curt answers that wouldn't fully satisfy her curiosity. They hid behind a dune covered with tufts of cordgrass to wait. Sure enough, less than an hour after they settled in, there was a soft whickering from within a wild thicket of bayberry bushes. A velvety pink muzzle nosed aside some branches, and a small but sturdy looking mare picked her way daintily through the brush. She had a white coat with chestnut patches and a snowy mane and tail windblown from the cool breeze blowing off the coast. She neighed softly. Horses appeared seemingly out of thin air, springing from within the bayberry hedge, milling only ten feet from where Genna and Elixir were hiding. As Genna watched, something extraordinary took place. At first it just looked like a wave rolling to shore, but as she looked closer she saw that it was made of horses. The horses were made of water, and their feet made a chilling, echoey pattering noise on the surface of the water as they skimmed across it. Genna stared in disbelief as the swell of horses broke on the shore. The water from the wave receded, pulling off the sand, but the horses stayed, rivulets of water streaming from their bodies. Genna tried counting the ponies. She got to thirty-four before she lost track and gave up. The rising sun glowed on their coats, catching in the salt crystallized on long fetlock hairs, glinting off unshod hooves or pooling like the still waters of a turquoise lagoon in the lone blue eye of a Cremello stallion. The ponies on the shore surged forward to greet the water horses, whickering with what could only be described as joy. The two groups circled each other, but they never touched. Part of Genna wondered if that was because they couldn't. "They meet each other here every morning," Elixir murmured. His voice was low and raspy, and for a second Genna thought he was crying, but she looked at his face and it was as dry and blank as always. At first she thought Elixir wasn't going to say anything else, but he surprised her by continuing. "The water horses. They're ghosts in a way," he said softly. "They're the horses that didn't make it to shore when the Spanish galleon sank. Their souls were caught in the sea. They can come ashore, but only on the sand, and the sun's rays can't touch them." The eastern sky was flushed with pink; the sun was just minutes away from fully rising. The water horses lifted their heads in unison, perfected over centuries of practice. The water horses shifted restlessly, and a stallion leaped lithely into the air, striking at the ground before springing into a gallop. As one being they wheeled around, flying over the sea and finally, just as they were nearly out of view, plunging seamlessly back into the glassy ocean where they had come from.

Cities

Two girls put their heads underwater.
Do you understand?
Over the fence the car is parked and humming;
The night divides itself into panes of green and gold,
then blue and black.

The houses here are
dressed in snow
as brides are.
Patches of ice, then the phone lines falling and rising
like a beat in reverse as the road
conspires towards its forested border.

The water devours the head
but what devours the body it leaves behind?

Through the open door
I can see the fruit rotting in the fruit bowl,
the roots put down by the sleeping family
at night.

Upcoming Events and Opportunities

Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature

MusicC 2026 Festival

THE BLACK ANGEL: Music, Myth, and Memory
April 30 - May 2, 2026

Explore the intersection of music and literature at Iowa City's premiere chamber music festival. This three-day series examines how composers across centuries have engaged with mortality, symbolism, and the unseen, inspired by Iowa City's Black Angel legend.

Poetry in Public

Have your poem featured across the community! Writers of all ages in Johnson County are invited to submit their work by April 30, 2026.

Glory of the Senses High School Essay Contest

Continuing Paul Engle's tradition of inspiring writers and celebrating Iowa's rich culture, this annual contest invites Iowa sophomores and juniors to write about an "Iowa experience," drawing on a specific memory to capture the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches of the day. The author of the top essay receives one year of University of Iowa tuition, and select runners-up receive \$500 scholarships from the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature. Deadline: May 1, 2026

Iowa City Book Festival

October 19-25, 2026

For more information: iowacityofliterature.org