

# GLORY OF THE SENSES: PAUL ENGLE ESSAY CONTEST

## Presented by the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature

In honor of Paul Engle, the longtime director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and co-founder of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature organization presents the Glory of the Senses essay contest. Iowa high school sophomores and juniors are invited to write an essay that captures a uniquely Iowan experience using all five senses. In doing so, they follow a path similar to that of Engle, who wrote about his own upbringing in Iowa in his memoir, *A Lucky American Childhood*.

The essays are evaluated by judges from ACT. The student with the best essay will receive one year of free tuition at the University of Iowa. Runners up will receive a \$500 scholarship from the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature.

UPDATE - The deadline to submit is May 15, 2026.

## About Your Essay

Consider your own Iowa experience. In your essay, choose a single, specific Iowa memory to write into life. It could be a day you escaped Iowa's humid air in the sparkling waters of a lake, a bitter cold morning spent digging out from under an Iowa blizzard, a crisp autumn Saturday in the crowd at a football game, or a soggy spring rain turning the rich Iowa soil to mud. Then, in an essay of three to five pages, tell the story of that day, that moment, fully. What did this Iowa experience teach you about life or love or friendship or family? Pay special attention to include details that evoke the sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch of your memory so that, as Engle did in his writing, a reader one hundred years in the future can experience your Iowa in a "Glory of the Senses."

## Requirements

1. Students must be a sophomore or junior at an Iowa high school during the 2024-25 academic year, or be aged 15, 16 or 17 and registered through a Home School Assistance Program in Iowa to qualify.
2. Submit an essay not to exceed five, type-written pages in 12 pt. Times New Roman or equivalent, double-spaced.
3. The essay must be the original work of the student. Essays determined to include elements not generated by the student will be disqualified.
4. The student's name should not appear anywhere on the essay itself.
5. A title for the essay should be included on the first page of the submission.
6. Either submit online (instructions are below) or by email or mail. If not submitting online, the cover letter found at the end of this packet must be included with each submission.

7. Any number of students from a school may submit work to this competition, but only one submission per student will be accepted.

## How To Submit

It is preferred that essays be submitted online at this link:

<https://bit.ly/GOTScontest>

Note: A Google account is required to use this method.

If you are unable to submit online, essays may be submitted by emailing them to [info@iowacityofliterature.org](mailto:info@iowacityofliterature.org). Please put “Paul Engle Day Student Essay Contest submission” in the subject line. They also may be mailed to the City of Literature office at the address on p. 5. All emailed or mailed submissions must include the cover sheet found at the end of this packet.

**The submission deadline has been updated to May 15, 2026.**

We look forward to reading your writing, and we welcome you to contact us with any questions or comments about this process, the essay contest, or Paul Engle Day.

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NOTE: A rubric has been established that will guide judges as they evaluate the essays. The rubric is available on the City of Literature web site.

Winners will be notified on or around August 1, 2026.

About the first prize University of Iowa scholarship: To qualify for the award, the winning student must be eligible for enrollment at the University of Iowa as a full-time in-state student in their freshman year. This is a non-renewable, non-transferable award.

## ABOUT PAUL ENGLE

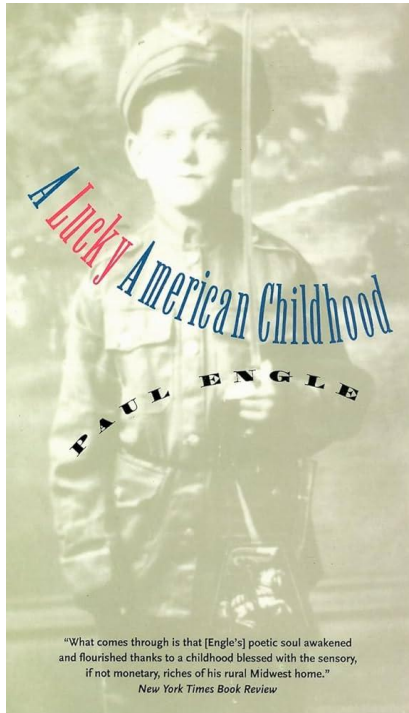
Paul Hamilton Engle was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on October 12, 1908, and grew up in a frame house in the Wellington Heights area. After graduating from Washington High School in Cedar Rapids, Engle attended Coe College and the University of Iowa where he was one of the first students to earn an advanced degree based on a thesis of creative work—a collection of poems. His first published collection, *Worn Earth*, went on to win the Yale Series of Young Poets. His best-selling second book of poetry, *American Song*, was heralded on the cover of the *New York Times Book Review* in a headline declaring him “A New Voice in American Poetry.” After Iowa, Engle travelled as a Rhodes Scholar to Oxford University in England.



Though Engle did not establish the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, he built its reputation as the top graduate writing program in the United States. During his tenure as director, he was responsible for luring some of the finest writers of the day to Iowa City, and many other prominent novelists and poets served as faculty under Engle. Additionally, Engle increased enrollment and oversaw numerous students of future fame and influence, including Flannery O'Connor, John Irving, Raymond Carver, William Stafford, and Robert Bly. After directing the Writers' Workshop for 24 years, Engle and future-second-wife Nieh Hualing co-founded The University of Iowa's International Writing Program, which invited dozens of published authors from around the globe to visit the University of Iowa to write and collaborate. For their work with the IWP, Engle and his wife were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976. Engle died at the age of 82, having published fourteen books of poetry, a novel, a memoir, and an opera libretto, and his literary legacy lives on in the lives and works of those authors he helped to educate and inspire.

## THE GLORY OF THE SENSES

In his memoir, *A Lucky American Childhood*, Engle describes his Iowa upbringing and how it helped him to grow from the son of a horse trainer in the heartland to a poet and professor of international reputation. More than merely keeping a record of locations and events, Engle uses sensory detail to evoke his experience, to recreate it for the reader.



In the chapter entitled “The Glory of the Senses,” Engle addresses each of the senses in turn to bring to life the Iowa of his youth. He revels in “the smell of wood and coal [that] burned the kitchen air” and the “healthy sound ... of a horse’s broad teeth grinding grain,” experiences that were common to a young person growing up at the beginning of the twentieth century in Iowa. He recalls the accents of the Czech, German, Irish, and Russian immigrants whose “speech had not yet become homogenized by radio and television...trying hard to communicate with these strange Americans,” sounds that mirrored the combination of heritages that comprise the American quilt. As he watches the spectacle of a cattle drive down Fifth Avenue in Cedar Rapids, the animals “snorting, frightened of the city, tossing their horns, trampling the lawns, a furious animal force...,” Engle says he “learned from them, as I watched their massive motion, the power of mass,” as the “thousand-pound beef animals look at you with their oval, liquid eyes...”

Like every other poet, Paul Engle understood the power of the written word to transport the reader to another time and place, to impart experience viscerally, to make the reader feel as if she were *there*. Even after travelling the world, Engle returned to Iowa to live and write because “this was surely the best of all worlds,” where there was “no sense of the destruction of life, only of its rich creativeness.”

Here at the beginning of the twenty-first century, more than one hundred years after the birth of Paul Engle, we find ourselves in a very different world. The Iowa that Engle describes in his writing feels like a foreign country to our modern noses and ears, just as the textures and sights of our world would seem like a distant planet to the young Paul Engle. But what was true about Iowa for Paul Engle at the beginning of the twentieth-century is true now, we are surrounded by a vivid tapestry of sight and sound and smell that, if you pay attention to it, will not only enrich your experience, it will enlighten your mind.



## Glory of the Senses Essay Contest Cover Sheet

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Essay title: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a sophomore? Yes/No

Parent/Guardian name \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Email: \_\_\_\_\_

High School: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal's Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Language Arts Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher's Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Area Education Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Visit [www.iowaaea.org/find-my-aea](http://www.iowaaea.org/find-my-aea) to find the name of your AEA or ask your school principal.