

# WordSmith Writing Olympics

Sponsored by the University of Memphis Department of English, WordSmith is an annual writing contest for students in grades 7 through 12 of public and private schools in the Mid-South. The WordSmith Tournament Day events test students' skills in four modes of nonfiction: description, narration, persuasion, and exposition. All students receive the same writing assignment in each category and are judged within their grade level. It's the perfect way to encourage AND reward excellence in writing!

WordSmith is traditionally held on the first or second weekend in February on the University of Memphis campus.

## Tournament Day Dash Events

The first three events on Tournament Day are the timed short dashes (**40 words**, **80 words**, and **120 words**). The top three winners (and up to two honorable mentions) of each dash from each grade compete in the Main Event, the **400-word Dash**. Two students per grade per school may register to be on the Tournament Day Team.

**40-word Dash:** description of an object (32 -48 words; 10 minutes). Each writer is given a small object—such as a piece of cereal, a feather, a wingnut, a craft bead—to describe so that a reader who has not seen the object can visualize it. The description, in PRESENT TENSE, should be an exact impression that conveys all relevant sense responses (sight, sound, touch, smell, etc.) The writer should describe the object, not create a fiction suggested by the object. Figurative language and imagery may be used to enhance the description.

**80-word Dash:** narration of an event shown in a black-and-white copy of a photograph (64 -96 words; 20 minutes). Each writer is given a copy of a photograph. The writer should interpret what is happening at the moment captured in the photo. Because no explanation accompanies the picture, different writers will use their imaginations to interpret the same picture in various ways. The narration, in PRESENT TENSE, should convey the logical sequence of the actions and interpret the emotions and motives that are implied by the images.

**120-word Dash:** persuasive letter to the editor (96-144 words; 30 minutes). The writer will choose one issue suggested by a collection of recent news headlines and write a letter about the issue to the editor of a newspaper. The writer should state a definite, clear position about the issue and try to persuade the readers of the newspaper to agree with that position. The writer may take any position on the issue; the letter is judged solely on the effectiveness of the persuasion.

**Main Event—400-word Dash:** exposition on a given topic (320-480 words; 60 minutes). The writer will choose from a list of topics and compose an essay that conforms to the general criteria. The writer may use any combination of expository strategies (examples, comparison, analysis, definition, etc.) to develop the essay. Topics choices range from personal narratives to commentaries on contemporary culture.

## General Judging Criteria

- sharply focused controlling idea
- unity, coherence, completeness
- imagery
- accurate, specific details
- fresh, figurative language
- standard English

## Prizes

- Each school that participates receives a gold medal.
- Each student who competes on Tournament Day receives a certificate.
- The first-, second-, third-place, and honorable mention winners in each grade in each of the Tournament Day events receive a ribbon.
- The top 3 students in each grade receive gold, silver, and bronze medals, respectively.
- The top 3 schools in each grade division receive trophies.

WordSmith:  
Words Matter.