



The Gold Medal Blueprint – How Scholastic Writing Awards Are Won, Lost, and Decided

Step-by-step craft, real award-level analysis, and workshop assignments for grades 9 to 12.

In this guide

01.1 The Official Rules, Categories, and Calendar

01.2 Anatomy of a Gold Medal Piece

01.3 Silver, Gold Key, Honorable Mention, and No Award: What Separates Each Tier

01.4 Your Gold Medal Revision and Submission Plan

Each part teaches the skill, shows how winning writers make their choices, and ends with workshop assignments. Coaching notes and model responses are at the back.

01.1 The Official Rules, Categories, and Calendar

Before craft comes eligibility. This section lays out the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards rules as published on artandwriting.org, then shows how to apply them to your own draft without losing a piece on a technicality.

Why This Matters

A judge can only reward what reaches the screen in a valid entry. Every year, strong drafts are weakened by problems that have nothing to do with talent: a story entered in the wrong category, a name in a header, a PDF that jurors cannot open, a poem pasted without its line breaks. None of these require genius to fix. They require reading the rules once, carefully, and building a checklist.

This guide is independent coaching. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by Scholastic. The facts below come from the program's own pages (categories, participation terms, FAQ, how-to-enter and calendar) as read in October 2026. Rules and dates can change, so treat artandwriting.org as the final word and check it again before you submit.

What Scholastic Does and Does Not Publish

Scholastic publishes what jurors weigh: **originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision**. It does not publish a scoring rubric, a points scale, or the percentage of entries that earn each award. One secondary source adds that judges value distinctive voice, creative risk, substantial revision and deliberate choice of form. That is a third-party summary, not an official statement. Whenever this guide describes what separates one tier from another, it is coach inference from publicly readable winning pieces, and it will say so.

Who Can Enter

Grades 7-12, and at least 13 years old on the entry date.

You attend school in, and live in, the US, a US territory or military base, or Canada (excluding Quebec). Entrants abroad are ineligible.

Your region is assigned automatically by your school's zip code (homeschool and virtual students use their home zip). Regional partners run judging and collect fees.

Senior division is grades 9-12. The Novel category is senior only. The Writing Portfolio is for graduating seniors (grade 12) only.

The Writing Categories and Their Limits

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Category	Limit	What it is
Critical Essay	500-3,000 words	Informs or persuades on an idea or topic: reviews, persuasive essays, opinion pieces. Sources go in the Citations and Footnotes box, which is not counted. No required citation style.
Flash Fiction	Up to 1,000 words	A complete story, not an excerpt.
Journalism	500-3,000 words	Fact-based writing on newsworthy topics, meant for publication. Sources go in the Work Sources field (not counted); include links if published.
Novel	Up to 3,000 words, including a synopsis of about 250 words	An excerpt (a full chapter or section) of a longer prose work. The synopsis sits at the top of the text box. Senior only.
Personal Essay & Memoir	500-3,000 words	Creative nonfiction based on opinion, experience or emotion.
Poetry	3-100 lines	Verse of any kind, including prose poetry, free verse, formal poems, song lyrics and spoken word. One poem per entry; a sectioned longer poem counts as one.
Screenplays & Scripts	500-3,000 words	Dialogue, action and stage direction for TV, film or stage. Excerpts must be labeled. A script over 3,000 words may include a 250-word synopsis that counts toward the limit.
Short Story	1,000-3,000 words	A fictional prose narrative. Under 1,000 words belongs in Flash Fiction.
Speculative Fiction	500-3,000 words	Science fiction, fantasy, horror, dystopian, alternate history, worldbuilding, mythology. A full story, not an excerpt. Novel-length work goes in Novel.
Writing Portfolio	Six works	Graduating seniors only. Shows versatility, diverse techniques and a cohesive developed voice. Each piece follows its own category limit. Requires a Writer Statement and a separate Personal Statement, each 100-500 words.

The General Rules Every Entry Must Follow

- ◆ **No identifying information anywhere in the manuscript.** That includes your name in headers, title pages, portfolio titles and statements.
- ◆ **Use fictional names for real people in nonfiction.** Public and historical figures do not need to be renamed.
- ◆ **Type or paste directly into the Portal text box.** PDFs and hyperlinks cannot be reviewed by judges. Jurors see roughly what appears in the box, including line breaks and spacing.
- ◆ **Write primarily in English;** include translations for other languages where possible. Hyperlinks, illustrations, photographs and graphics are discouraged.
- ◆ **One category per work.** Previously awarded work may be re-entered only inside a portfolio. List all influences in Work Sources, and list collaborators there too.
- ◆ **Originality.** The work must be your own idea and creation. Any topic is allowed.
- ◆ **You may edit until your regional deadline.**
- ◆ **Rights.** You keep your copyright and grant the Alliance a perpetual, irrevocable, worldwide, royalty-free, non-exclusive license. An award can be revoked for rule violations.

The AI Policy in Plain Words

AI may be used for brainstorming, outlining, research, and the built-in features of standard software.

A final work that is itself AI-generated is ineligible.

You must disclose AI use, and documenting your process is strongly encouraged.

AI-generated portfolio statements are not allowed.

Your coaching takeaway: keep dated drafts and notes. The strongest proof that a piece is yours is a visible trail of revisions in your own voice.

Fees and the 2027 Calendar

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Item	What the official pages say
Fees	15 dollars per individual entry and 40 dollars per portfolio (as of Oct 1, 2026). A fee waiver is available on self-certified need; no proof is required in the portal, though some regions may ask.
Entries open	October 1, 2026
Regional deadlines	Begin December 1, 2026 and vary by region; some run as late as January 4, 2027. Find your own region's date.
Regional announcements	January 27, 2027
National announcement	March 31, 2027
National ceremony and awards week	June 8-11, 2027, New York City. The Carnegie Hall ceremony is for Gold Medalists and select special award winners.

The Award Tiers at a Glance

Tier	Level	What is published
Honorable Mention	Regional	Third regional tier.
Silver Key	Regional	Second regional tier.
Gold Key	Regional	Top regional honor. Writing (and some art) advances to national judging.
American Voices Medal	National	One per region per category.
Silver Medal	National	National tier below Gold.
Gold Medal	National	Highest national award, given to a relatively small number of works.

There is **no bronze award**. National Student Poets (five per year) is a separate honor. Portfolios are judged as a body of work, blind to age, gender and hometown. A secondary source reports about 350,000 works submitted per year and about 100,000 receiving regional recognition; dividing those gives roughly 29 percent, which is our own arithmetic on a secondary figure, not a Scholastic statement. Scholastic does not publish how many awards each tier receives.

Case Studies: Rule Walkthroughs

Rules are easiest to learn by applying them. These three walkthroughs use invented, typical situations.

WALKTHROUGH 1: WHICH CATEGORY DOES MY PIECE BELONG IN?

You have a 1,350-word piece about the day your school district blocked a research website. You interviewed the district's technology director and two students, and you checked the legal basis for the filter. You also have a 1,900-word true story about caring for a grandparent, and a 940-word invented story about a lighthouse keeper.

SOLUTION

Piece one. It reports on a newsworthy issue with named sources and is meant for publication, so Journalism fits. If you had instead built an argument from texts and ideas with no interviews, Critical Essay would fit. The published pair from the research shows how blurry the line can be: a regional Gold Key piece entered as a Critical Essay reads like a reported feature, while a National Silver Medal journalism piece ran under the school paper's Opinion label. Choose by what the piece does most: reports facts from sources, or argues an idea.

Piece two. Creative nonfiction about your own experience is Personal Essay & Memoir. Use fictional names for the real people in it, even your grandparent.

Piece three. At 940 words a complete story belongs in Flash Fiction. At 1,000 or more it would move to Short Story. Because a piece can enter only one category, decide before you pay the fee, not after.

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WALKTHROUGH 2: THE WORD COUNT AND ANONYMITY CHECK

Draft header: 'Maya Lopez, Period 3, Ms. Kane.' The essay has 3,180 words. The final paragraph says 'my best friend Jordan Reyes still has the letter.' The bibliography is pasted at the bottom.

SOLUTION

Header. Delete it. No name, teacher or school anywhere in the manuscript box.

Length. For a Critical Essay or Journalism piece, sources placed in the Citations and Footnotes box (or Work Sources field) are not counted. Move the bibliography there, then count only the essay itself. If it is still over 3,000, cut; do not hope the counter is generous.

Real names. Jordan Reyes is a private person in a nonfiction piece. Replace the name with a fictional one. A public or historical figure would not need that change.

Last check. Search the full text for your surname, your town, your school's mascot and your teacher's name. Identifying details can hide in the body, not just the header.

WALKTHROUGH 3: NOVEL EXCERPT ARITHMETIC AND PORTAL FORMATTING

You want to enter Chapter 9 of your novel. The chapter runs 2,900 words. You also drafted a 260-word synopsis. You wrote the chapter in a document with italics, a table for a text-message exchange, and a hyperlink to a playlist.

SOLUTION

Arithmetic. The Novel limit of 3,000 words includes the roughly 250-word synopsis at the top. 2,900 plus 260 is 3,160, so you must trim about 160 words across the two parts. A tighter synopsis (around 250) means an excerpt near 2,750.

Formatting. Judges see roughly what appears in the Portal text box. A table and a hyperlink are discouraged and may not survive. Rewrite the text-message exchange as plain lines and delete the link.

Test it. Paste the text into the box, read it on screen, and check that paragraph breaks and spacing look the way you intend.

Step-by-Step: Your Rules Audit

- 1 Confirm eligibility** Check grade, age, location and school. Find your region by school zip code and look up its deadline.
- 2 Choose the category by function** Ask what the piece does: reports, argues, remembers, imagines, performs. Then check the word or line limit for that category.
- 3 Count honestly** Count the manuscript only, using the same rules the category uses (synopsis included for Novel; sources excluded for Critical Essay and Journalism).
- 4 Strip identity** Remove names, teacher, school, and any title page. Rename real people in nonfiction.
- 5 Prepare for the Portal box** Paste plain text. Remove links, images, tables. Check line breaks, especially for poems and scripts.
- 6 Fill Work Sources** List influences, collaborators, research, and any permitted AI use, honestly.
- 7 Schedule submission** Submit several days before your regional deadline, because you may still edit until it passes.

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BEFORE AND AFTER: CLEANING A MANUSCRIPT FOR THE PORTAL (COACH SAMPLE)

BEFORE

The Last Ferry
by Dev Anand, Westfield High, Mr. Cho's English 11
[link: my playlist]
Chapter text begins here, with a photo of the dock pasted in.

SOLUTION

AFTER
The Last Ferry
Chapter text begins here, in plain text, with no photo and no link.
What changed and why: the byline, school and teacher are identifying information and are not allowed in the manuscript. The playlist link and photo are discouraged because hyperlinks and graphics cannot be reviewed the way plain text can. The title stays, because it belongs to the work. The cleaned version puts the reader's whole attention on the writing.

BEFORE AND AFTER: POEM LINE BREAKS SURVIVING THE PASTE (COACH SAMPLE)

BEFORE (pasted from a word processor, lines merged)
The porch light hums all night a moth keeps knocking and nobody answers.

SOLUTION

AFTER (re-entered in the box)
The porch light hums all night.
A moth keeps knocking.
Nobody answers.
What changed and why: jurors see line breaks and spacing roughly as they appear in the box, and a poem is judged by its lines (3-100 of them). Merged lines turn a poem into a sentence. Always view the text after pasting, and fix breaks inside the box itself.

Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric, so this table is coach inference from publicly readable winners and from general experience with contest entries. It is a hypothesis about how rule literacy shows up, not a judge's checklist.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Category matches the piece's real function; limits and anonymity are handled without distraction.	Category fits; occasional small slips (a sloppy break, an uncertain count) that do not block reading.	Piece sits awkwardly in its category, runs over or under the limit, or loses formatting in the box.
Form choices (line breaks, script format, synopsis) are deliberate and survive the paste.	Form is clear but not always controlled.	Formatting is accidental or broken.
Sources and influences are listed honestly; the voice is plainly the writer's.	Sources listed; voice is present but borrowed in places.	Influences hidden or work reads as imitation.

Common traps

1. Entering a 940-word story as a Short Story. 2. Leaving a name, teacher or school in a header or in the text. 3. Uploading or pasting a PDF or link instead of typing into the box. 4. Counting the bibliography or forgetting that a Novel synopsis counts toward its 3,000 words.

Coach's Playbook

Keep a one-page entry sheet per piece: category, limit, final count, regional deadline, sources, and a yes/no on each of anonymity, plain text and fictional names. Initial it before you submit.

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Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes: find your region and its deadline on artandwriting.org, write the date on a calendar, and run Walkthrough 2 on your most finished draft.

Practice

WORKSHOP

The Official Rules, Categories, and Calendar

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1.

List your three most finished pieces. For each, name the category, the limit, and your current count.
2.

Pick one piece that could fit two categories. Write a four-sentence argument for the category you chose.
3.

Write the 'function test' for your piece: does it report, argue, remember, imagine, or perform? Explain in three sentences.
4.

Take a page of your own writing and circle every name, place or detail that could identify you. Rewrite those spots.
5.

Rewrite a real person in one of your nonfiction drafts under a fictional name. Check that nothing else gives them away.
6.

Paste a poem or script excerpt into a plain text editor, then fix its line breaks. Note what broke.
7.

Write your own one-paragraph summary of the AI policy in everyday language, then list the dated drafts you can show.
8.

Find your region's deadline and build a countdown with three checkpoints before it.
9.

Draft the Work Sources note for your best piece, listing influences and any research.

01.2

Anatomy of a Gold Medal Piece

This section takes apart publicly readable award winners across poetry, memoir, essay, fiction, journalism and scripts to see how development, organization, syntax, diction and devices combine into one final effect.

Why This Matters

Students lose points in a predictable way: they explain what a stronger piece would trust the reader to see. They announce the lesson, label the symbol, and close with a moral. Note that I read many of the pieces below through detailed summaries rather than verbatim text, so I paraphrase and describe rather than quote.

Students lose points in a predictable way: they explain what a stronger piece would trust the reader to see. They announce the lesson, label the symbol, and close with a moral. As a reminder, the analysis below is a coach's reading of published pieces, many of which I could read only through detailed summaries rather than verbatim text, so I paraphrase and describe rather than quote.

The Six Lenses

Read any piece through six lenses, in order. They are not a rubric from Scholastic. They are a way to see how a writer's choices produce an effect.

Lens	Question to ask	Typical gold-level answer
Development	How does the piece move from first line to last, and what changes?	A genuine change in knowledge, stakes or stance, not just more description.
Organization	What governing shape does the reader feel by the second paragraph or stanza?	A frame, ring, braid, numbered attempts, borrowed form or deliberate chronology.
Syntax and structure	Where do sentences or lines lengthen, shorten, fragment, pause?	Variation tied to emotional pressure; short units at the hardest moments.
Diction	What word families does the writer choose, and do two registers collide?	Concrete, specific nouns and verbs; one or two systems of imagery.
Devices	Which repetitions, metaphors, asides or motifs recur, and do they change meaning?	Repetition that shifts as it repeats; figurative language that does reasoning.
Effect and framework	What does the reader feel at the end, and which choices produced it?	An ending that acts, withholds or complicates rather than explains.

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Five Patterns Seen Across Genres (coach inference)

A structure the reader feels early: asides, rules, numbered attempts, a letter frame, a meal, a hypothetical.

A formal turn, not an announced one: a colon, a one-word stanza, a tense jump, a point-of-view handoff.

Specific, odd, bodily or domestic detail in place of abstraction.

Endings that do something: an act, an image, a question, a handoff. Rarely a lesson.

Form that earns itself: the fragmentation, braid or frame is justified by what the piece is about.

The Effect Equation

Choice + framework = effect.

Name the choice (a one-word stanza), the framework (a three-stanza poem about a euphemism), and the effect (the reader sees the town's excuse isolated on the page).

If you cannot name all three for a decision in your draft, the decision is probably decoration.

Case Studies

All tiers below are as the research file states them from school pages and the Alliance's own newsroom. Several are school self-reports. Where I read a piece only through a summary, I say so. I paraphrase and never reproduce passages.

POETRY: 'M' (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, POETRY, 2018; FROM A SCHOOL BLOG)

An 18-line poem in two stanzas. A grandson describes his grandfather's faded forearm tattoo: a crude letter drawn by boys when the grandfather was nine.

SOLUTION

Development. A two-line visual opening ends on a colon, which hands the reader from looking at an arm to being told what is on it. The long second stanza releases facts in a careful order: the letter, why it is not his initial, the tools, his age, his hope of acceptance, his mother's grief. Then the poem steps into the speaker's own childhood confusion and jumps to the present, where the grandfather bargains with God.

Structure and devices. Three parenthetical asides carry the most painful facts: the antisemitic reason, the wish to be accepted, and the final bargain. Whispered syntax performs how families speak of such things. The repeated 'nine' fixes the age as the moral center.

Effect. The poem never explains the lesson. It ends inside a parenthesis on a man's concern for his wife. The structure does the interpreting, and the reader supplies the rest.

POETRY: 'COLLISION THEORY' (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL, POETRY, 2016; ALSO A REGIONAL GOLD KEY, PER SCHOOL PAGES)

About 44 lines in three numbered sections, each headed by a rule from chemistry: molecules must collide, align, and carry enough energy. A breakup narrated as a proof.

SOLUTION

Development and organization. The poem opens by promising a proof, then maps the relationship onto the three rules one for one. Section I covers contact, Section II orientation and balance (with a one-word line about the pair as a constant), Section III the breakdown. The opening line returns near the end as a ring.

Diction and devices. One metaphor from physical chemistry runs the whole poem without breaking register. Each term (catalyst, equilibrium, constant) is chosen so its technical meaning matches an emotional event. A triple repetition in Section III turns the register intimate at the moment the science fails.

Effect. The speaker cannot say the pain directly, so the metaphor reasons for them. It ends on a failed proof in which the speaker is the exception who reacted when the other did not. Cleverness becomes self-recognition.

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MEMOIR: 'DRAW' (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR, 2024; MINNESOTA REGION PAGE)

A roughly 1,400-word essay about a girl and her grandfather, from hide-and-seek in a kitchen to chess on Saturdays.

SOLUTION

Development. About 85 percent is scene and summary. The essay builds a rule: he never lets her win. Only then does it name his Alzheimer's, so the reveal inverts the rule instead of announcing an illness. In the last game she quietly sets up captures he misses, and the game ends in a draw.

Organization and syntax. Chronological with a circular frame (a loss in the first scene, a draw at the end). Comma-rich sentences carry ritual scenes; clipped fragments carry tense moments. One coaching phrase repeats like a refrain.

Diction and devices. Concrete objects (spices, a rusted clasp, brown leather) anchor scenes; abstraction appears only in the final reflection. The title puns on a tied game, a sketch, and drawing someone near.

Effect. The structure is the argument: a rule is established so thoroughly that breaking it is an ethical act.

MEMOIR: 'WATER AND EVERYTHING I AM AFRAID OF' (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL PORTFOLIO, 2023; ALLIANCE NEWSROOM)

A fragmented, circular essay of about ten asterisk-separated sections that begins in a bathtub and returns there.

SOLUTION

Development. It opens sensory, interprets later, then turns meta in the middle: the writer says she does not know where it is going and lists writing rules she was taught (avoid abstraction, supply a takeaway), then breaks them on purpose. Images of water, hair and prayer recur under changed pressure.

Syntax and devices. Long, cumulative, lyrical sentences are broken by one-word lines; fragments mirror a fragmented self. Meta-commentary is a device here, not an apology.

Effect. There are two stakes: homesickness, and the guilt of whether she has any right to the story. The refusal to resolve reads as honest because the form has primed it. Compare the Gold Key essay above: the national-level piece adds a second-order stake and argues for its own form (coach inference from $n=2$).

FLASH FICTION: 'STOLEN HEARTS' (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, FLASH FICTION, 2017; SCHOOL BLOG)

An epistolary horror story of about 850 words: a dying narrator's letter-confession about a romance that becomes a murder.

SOLUTION

Development. In the first lines the reader has an addressee, a deadline, a story to pass down, and a withheld box. The middle uses an inverted scene budget: the romance is summarized, while the first meeting and the killing are dramatized.

Diction and syntax. Romantic, idealizing language collides with clinical, precise language, and the narrator hears no difference. That gap is the horror. Long accumulating sentences carry the romance and the killing; short ones deliver turns.

Devices and effect. The heart in the title shifts from emotion to organ. The final move is an instruction to open the box, so the last image lives in the reader's mind. The research file notes it began as a class exercise, so the lever was form choice, not endless polish.

JOURNALISM: 'ONLINE SAFETY, OR OVERPROTECTION?' (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, JOURNALISM, 2016; PARTIAL READ ONLY)

A feature on a school district's internet filter. The research read roughly 700 words, through a jump line; the ending was not retrieved.

SOLUTION

Development and organization. A concrete lede shows two innocent searches blocked by a keyword. A nut graf frames the conflict as a two-sided question. Subheads move from the viral student dispute to the wider policy debate, so it is issue-driven narrative, not strict inverted pyramid.

Sourcing. Four named, labeled voices with different stakes: a district official, a protesting student, an insider critic, and an outside expert. The reporter flags the student's account as his account and notes why the district declined to comment.

Effect. The reader sides with the students before any adult speaks, yet nothing is editorialized. Because the ending was unread, I make no claim about the kicker. The main gap the research flagged: no data on how much is blocked.

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SCRIPTS: 'WE WRITE THE WORDS WE CANNOT SAY' (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, SCRIPT; DESCRIPTION-BASED ONLY)

The research read a school blog's description, not the script. A shy student writes a play whose premiere is threatened when her teacher lets a donor's son take credit. Inside is a play about a young woman who escapes cold parents through marriage.

SOLUTION

What the description supports. A frame story around an inner play gives two layers that echo one theme: voice taken or withheld, and confinement. An older version of a character narrating is a stage-native way to compress time within a tight word budget.

Inference, labeled. The structure is itself an argument about authorship. A bounded cast and one theme surfacing through action fit the 3,000-word cap. No full winning script was publicly readable, so this is the thinnest case study here.

Step-by-Step: Reading a Winner Like a Writer

- 1 **Read it cold, once** Notice where you lean in and where you drift. Mark the single moment of strongest feeling.
- 2 **Map the shape** Number the stanzas, paragraphs or scenes. Note lengths. Where does the longest unit sit, and where does a short one interrupt?
- 3 **Find the turn** Name the formal event: a colon, a break, a tense change, a new speaker. Write one sentence on what changes.
- 4 **Collect the word families** List nouns and verbs. Which two systems of imagery appear? Do they collide?
- 5 **Track the repetition** Does anything repeat? Write what it means the first time, and what it means the last.
- 6 **Write the effect sentence** Finish: 'Because the writer chose X within framework Y, the reader feels Z.'
- 7 **Steal the move, not the content** Choose one structural move and apply it to a subject of your own.

BEFORE AND AFTER: A TURN THAT IS ANNOUNCED VS ENACTED (COACH SAMPLE)

BEFORE

My brother left for the army in June. I was angry, but I realized later that he was brave, and I learned that courage can look like leaving.

SOLUTION

AFTER

My brother's boots stayed by the door all June.

I moved them twice to vacuum.

Both times I put them back facing out.

What changed and why: the first version reports a feeling and delivers its lesson. The second shows one repeated action. The change from vacuuming to setting the boots facing out is the turn, and the reader infers hope and love without being told. Specific object, repeated act, no stated moral.

BEFORE AND AFTER: FLAT REGISTER VS COLLIDING REGISTERS (COACH SAMPLE)

BEFORE

The meal was lovely. We ate and talked. Then he gave me the bad news about the move.

SOLUTION

AFTER

He cut the roast into even slices, each the width of a thumb. 'We sign Thursday,' he said, and passed the gravy.

What changed and why: the first uses vague words (lovely, bad news) and gives every moment equal weight. The second uses a precise, domestic action to carry the news, and lets the calm politeness of the gravy sit against the size of the announcement. Two registers, ordinary and consequential, now press on each other.

Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric and no tier percentages, and lower-tier and non-winning texts are mostly unavailable. The table is coach inference from the sampled winners, which come from school pages that publish successes.

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Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Structure performs the content: asides, rules, frames, handoffs.	A clear structure and a good idea; some stanzas or paragraphs restate.	Structure is chronological by default; no felt shape.
Turn happens on the page and complicates the piece.	Turn is present but sometimes announced.	Piece stays at one level of intensity, or resolves neatly.
Specific, odd, bodily detail; two registers pressing on each other.	Concrete detail with occasional stock images.	Generic nouns and vague adjectives (lovely, special, meaningful).
Ending acts, withholds, or hands off.	Ending lands but partly explains.	Ending summarizes or states the lesson.

Common traps

1. Announcing the lesson in the last paragraph. 2. Choosing a fragmented or braided form because it looks literary, with no reason inside the piece. 3. Repeating a device without letting it change meaning. 4. Treating a Gold Key piece's flaws as permission: the research notes visible typos and unsourced claims even in recognized pieces, but they are not a plan.

Coach's Playbook

For every draft, answer in writing: What is the governing shape? Where is the turn? What are the two imagery systems? What repeats and how does it change? What does the ending do?

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, take one page of your best draft and underline every sentence that explains a feeling. Rewrite one as a concrete action or object.

Practice

WORKSHOP Anatomy of a Gold Medal Piece

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1.

Choose one of your own finished pieces and map its shape: number the paragraphs or stanzas and write what each does in five words.
2.

Name the turn in your piece in one sentence. If you cannot, draft one formal turn (a colon, a short stanza, a tense shift, a new speaker).
3.

List every image in your draft. Group them into word families and name the two strongest.
4.

Find one repetition in your piece. Write its meaning at first use and at last use. Revise so the meaning shifts.
5.

Write an effect sentence for one decision in your draft: 'Because I chose X within Y, the reader feels Z.'
6.

Pick one case study above and imitate its structural move on a different subject of your own, in 150 words.
7.

Rewrite one explained feeling in your draft as an action or object, then revise again to remove any commentary.
8.

Draft three endings for your piece: a summary, an image, an act. Choose one and explain why.
9.

Find a published piece you admire (not from this guide) and write a six-lens analysis in six sentences.

01.3

Silver, Gold Key, Honorable Mention, and No Award: What Separates Each Tier

The tier ladder runs from no award up to National Gold Medal. This section explains each rung, what Scholastic does and does not say about it, and what separates one from the next as far as published winners can show.

Why This Matters

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Students often treat the ladder as a mystery: some pieces win, some do not, and nobody says why. Part of that is true. Scholastic publishes no rubric and no tier percentages, and judges do not release comments on individual works. But a ladder you can reason about beats a lottery you can only fear. Studying what recognized pieces do, and what deliberate near-miss samples lack, lets you aim revision at the gaps that tend to matter.

Everything about the contrasts between tiers in this section is **coach inference** drawn from a small, non-random sample of publicly readable winners. It is not a Scholastic statement, and it may be wrong in individual cases. Treat it as a set of hypotheses to test on your own drafts.

The Ladder

Tier	Level	What Scholastic publishes
No award	Entry judged, not recognized	Nothing about individual results. Many strong entries do not place; the same piece can land differently in different regions and years.
Honorable Mention	Regional	Third regional tier.
Silver Key	Regional	Second regional tier.
Gold Key	Regional	Top regional honor; writing (and some art) advances to national judging.
American Voices Medal	National	One per region per category.
Silver Medal	National	Awarded nationally, below Gold.
Gold Medal	National	Highest national award, to a relatively small number. Gold Medalists are honored at the Carnegie Hall ceremony.

There is **no bronze award**. If a school newsletter or a parent says 'bronze', they mean something else. For graduating seniors, the Writing Portfolio has its own top honors (a Gold Medal Portfolio with a scholarship, and a Silver Medal with Distinction, per Scholastic's newsroom), and individual pieces inside it can also be entered and judged separately.

What We Do Not Know (and Will Not Pretend To)

No published rubric beyond: originality, technical skill, emergence of a personal voice or vision.

No published percentages for any tier. A school page reported that National Gold Medals went to only a small slice of 100,000 plus submissions; that is a school's claim, not an official figure.

Panels differ by region and year. A Gold Key in a large region is not necessarily the same strength as one in a small region.

Judges' comments on specific pieces are not public.

Limits of the Sample Behind This Guide

Winners only. Lower-tier and non-winning texts are mostly unavailable, so we cannot observe what judges passed over.

Many pieces were read through summaries of web pages, not verbatim text. Structure and syntax claims are more reliable than sound-level claims.

Several tier claims are school self-reports (school blogs, newsletters) that the research did not verify against an official database.

The pieces cluster in a few schools and regions, and a few sampled poets were younger than grade 9. Portfolio pieces were chosen by editors to showcase, so they are not each a medal-winning piece on its own.

Older winners may have entered under older limits. Use today's limits, not an old winner's length, as your guide.

What Separates Each Rung (Coach Inference)

- ◆ **No award to Honorable Mention.** A clear idea, deliberate sound or shape, and clean mechanics. The piece does what it sets out to do.
- ◆ **Honorable Mention to Silver Key.** A sharper claim or image, better pacing, and cleaner sentences. The piece begins to belong to one writer.
- ◆ **Silver Key to Gold Key.** A distinctive angle, real specificity, and at least one structural choice that does work: an echo ending, a counterargument, a conceit, a refrain that changes.
- ◆ **Gold Key to National Medal.** Voice and structure that perform the idea; a second-order stake; endings that act or withhold. The evidence here is thin.

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◆ **Silver Medal to Gold Medal.** Not visible in the sources. We do not claim to know.

Case Studies

These examples use tiers exactly as the research file reports them; several come from school pages. Paraphrase only, with no passages reproduced.

SILVER KEY: 'SONATA OF NIGHT AND DAY' (SILVER KEY, POETRY, 2021; SCHOOL NEWSLETTER)

A 72-line poem in 18 quatrains following one day from sunrise to dawn, with Day personified as a queen.

SOLUTION

What is strong. Consistent form, clear organization by time of day, steady music, and a circular ending. These are real skills.

What keeps it at Silver Key (inference). There is no human speaker, no stake, and no turn. Every stanza has the same register and weight, so length replaces development. Nothing in it is specific enough to belong to only one writer.

Lesson. The contrast piece for coaching: well-formed but even. Add a speaker with something at risk and a formal turn, and the same scaffolding could carry more.

HONORABLE MENTION: 'A FALLING LEAF' (HONORABLE MENTION, POETRY, 2026; SCHOOL NEWS PAGE; GRADE 8, OUTSIDE THIS GUIDE'S AGE RANGE)

A 16-line, loosely rhymed poem in which a leaf remembers its branch, falls, and accepts the ground.

SOLUTION

What is strong. A clear controlling idea, deliberate sound (rhyme, repeated 'down' openers), and coherence at a young age.

What keeps it at this tier (inference). The metaphor of a leaf for acceptance is familiar, nothing complicates it, and the ending resolves everything neatly.

Lesson. Technical awareness earns recognition; surprise and complication move work up. Sampled as an anchor, from a single poem.

GOLD KEY: 'AMBIDEXTROUS' AND 'PERMANENT MARKER' (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, POETRY, C. 2022; SOPHOMORE; SCHOOL BLOG)

Two poems by one writer. The first repeats a 'I believe in God, but I don't believe...' frame across four stanzas; the second extends a fear of writing in permanent marker.

SOLUTION

What is strong. Each has a big idea, a structuring repetition, and a payoff: the first ends on its title word as its last word, a hand that adapts; the second turns a triple repetition of 'Acting' into an accusation of pretense.

What they lack relative to national pieces (inference). Compression and unexpected detail. In the first, the stanzas stay at the level of statement until the final image. In the second, the shape is loose and some stanzas restate.

Lesson. A strong regional Gold Key often has one big conceit and one payoff. The next step is cutting restatement and putting imagery earlier.

GOLD KEY AND AMERICAN VOICES NOMINEE: 'BEFORE 9/11' (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, POETRY, 2019; NOMINEE ONLY; SCHOOL BLOG)

A roughly 50-line family-history poem following inherited gold from a South Indian rooftop to a Jersey City apartment.

SOLUTION

Development. The gold passes through a wedding, endearments, a theft, and a catalog of things the mother never does. Lines get longer at the point of pressure and shorter in the coda.

Effect. The title becomes legible only at the end, when a husband shaves his beard eight months before the date in the title. The poem never states the connection.

Tier note. The page names it a nominee for American Voices, not a winner. American Voices is one medal per region per category, so nomination shows how narrow the top is. Lesson: delayed meaning in a title is a high-value move.

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FICTION PAIR: 'CARNIVAL GAMES' (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL AND GOLD KEY, 2017) AND 'DREAMS' (GOLD KEY, 2017); SCHOOL BLOG

Two short stories from one school. The first is a frame story about a grieving narrator's friend; the second is a nested dream loop with a false waking.

SOLUTION

Carnival Games. A circular frame returns to one day; objects (a panda, a poster) carry grief so the narrator does not have to explain it. The research suggests the frame and objects are the likely lift above Gold Key. A single piece can be rewarded at both levels, so tier is not about genre.

Dreams. The dream twist is a weak ending by itself. The piece survives, probably, because a planted knife pays off and the narrator and intruder double each other. Warning: a bare 'it was all a dream' ending is a trap.

Lesson. Both use a structural idea; the higher piece ties it to an effect the reader feels, not just a gimmick.

NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL WITH FLAWS: A JOURNALISM OPINION PIECE (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL, JOURNALISM, 2018; SCHOOL PAPER)

A news-led argument on proposed science budget cuts. It explains how multi-year grants work, gives examples, and ends cautiously optimistic.

SOLUTION

What is strong. Timeliness, a clear explanation of a mechanism for general readers, concrete examples, and a committed point of view.

What is weak. No interviews or named experts, unlinked numbers, a misnamed agency in the lede, and a fragmentary sentence. It still placed nationally, so flawless copy is not a requirement.

Lesson, and a caution. Do not read this as permission to be sloppy. National panels vary, and sources and verification are easy upgrades. Also: the match to the award was by title only.

The Near-Miss Lab

Because non-winning texts are not public, the samples below are **original composites I wrote**. They are not from any student. Each is a plausible near-miss, written to show a specific gap.

NEAR-MISS SAMPLE A: A COMPETENT POEM THAT DOES NOT PLACE (COACH COMPOSITE)

The autumn leaves are falling down,
They paint the street in gold and brown.
The wind blows soft, the sky is gray,
I think of summer, far away.
But change is good, I tell my heart,
For every end is a new start.

SOLUTION

Strengths. Rhyme is controlled, imagery is clear, and the idea is coherent.

Gaps. The leaf and season are stock images, there is no speaker with a stake, nothing turns, and the last line states a lesson. Every line has the same weight.

Fix. Give the speaker a reason to care (a specific house, a person), add one concrete detail only this writer would notice, break the pattern at the halfway point, and end on an act or image instead of the sentence about change.

NEAR-MISS SAMPLE B: A MEMOIR OPENING THAT EXPLAINS TOO EARLY (COACH COMPOSITE)

My grandmother's kitchen was my favorite place. It taught me about family, love and tradition. Every Sunday we cooked together, and this meant a lot to me. I did not realize then how special those times were.

SOLUTION

Strengths. Sincere, correct, focused on one place.

Gaps. Almost every phrase is an abstraction or a label (taught me, meant a lot, special). There is no scene, no sensory detail, and the reflection arrives before the reader has felt anything.

Fix. Start in a moment: her hands, a pot lid, a rule she kept. Delay reflection until a scene has earned it. Replace 'special' with one thing only that kitchen contained.

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Step-by-Step: Diagnosing Your Draft's Tier Gap

- 1 Read the piece aloud** Mark every place where the energy flattens. Flat zones are where restatement and explanation hide.
- 2 Find the stake** Write one sentence on what could be lost or changed for the speaker. If you cannot, add one.
- 3 Locate the turn** Mark where the piece changes. If you cannot point to a formal event, create one.
- 4 Audit the ending** Does it summarize, explain, or act? Rewrite one version that acts.
- 5 Replace three abstractions** Circle three abstract words. Substitute a specific image or action for each.
- 6 Check the mechanics** Proofread for slips: repeated words, wrong pronouns, unsourced claims. Clean copy is probably necessary, not sufficient.

BEFORE AND AFTER: EVEN REGISTER VS A SHAPED POEM (COACH SAMPLE)

BEFORE

The morning is quiet and calm.
The river moves along.
The birds are singing a gentle song.
I feel peaceful.

SOLUTION

AFTER

The river is quiet. My father is quiet.
We both watch the line.
Neither of us says the thing about the layoff.
A fish takes the hook. He lets it go.

What changed and why: the first stays in one calm register with no speaker stake. The second gives a stake (a layoff nobody names), repeats 'quiet' so the second use darkens it, turns at the fish, and ends on an act that implies mercy and loss without explaining.

BEFORE AND AFTER: SUMMARY ENDING VS HANDING THE READER THE LAST STEP (COACH SAMPLE)

BEFORE

The night ended, and I knew that friendship means being there for the people you care about.

SOLUTION

AFTER

He was still at the bus stop at midnight. I sat down on the cold bench and did not say anything about his mother.

What changed and why: the first states the lesson. The second dramatizes the lesson as an act that costs the speaker something and leaves the reader to name it. The restraint around his mother is where the feeling lives.

Tier Check

Scholastic provides no rubric. This table is the coach's inference from the sampled winners and the near-miss composites, not an official scale.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Structure and content turn against or reinforce each other; a second-order stake; ending acts or withholds.	Strong concept and voice; one structural device; some restatement or explanation remains.	Clear idea and clean sound, but stock images and a neat resolution.
Specific, researched or lived texture; two registers pressing on each other.	Concrete detail; occasional stock images or loose stanzas.	Generic details and an even register throughout.
Reader does work: implication, gaps, a withheld image.	Reader does some work; some explanation of symbols.	The piece explains, labels and morals.

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Common traps

1. Mistaking length for development (eighteen similar stanzas, ten similar paragraphs). 2. Fixing only the mechanics when the real gap is stake or turn. 3. Believing a tier verdict is a verdict on you rather than on one reading by one panel. 4. Relying on a twist or a dream ending as the whole idea.

Coach's Playbook

Before you submit, answer four questions in writing: Who is the speaker and what is at stake? Where is the turn? What does the reader infer that I did not state? Does the ending act, or does it summarize?

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, take your draft's last paragraph or stanza and write two alternative endings: one image, one act. Read all three aloud and keep the one that trusts the reader most.

Practice

WORKSHOP

Silver, Gold Key, Honorable Mention, and No Award: What Separates Each Tier

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write the ladder from memory, from no award to National Gold Medal, and note that there is no bronze.
2. List three things Scholastic does not publish about judging, and explain why that matters for how you read this guide.
3. Choose one of your drafts and write a one-sentence description of the speaker and what they could lose.
4. Mark the turn in your draft, or write a new one, and describe it as a formal event on the page.
5. Take Near-Miss Sample A and rewrite it in eight lines with a speaker, a stake and a turn.
6. Take Near-Miss Sample B and rewrite its opening as a 120-word scene with no reflection.
7. Write an alternative ending for your draft: first a summary, then an image, then an act. Choose one.
8. Pick a case study above and write what a Silver Key version of it might lack, labeling it as inference.
9. Write a paragraph on why a tier result is not a verdict on you, using the fact that panels and years differ.

01.4 Your Gold Medal Revision and Submission Plan

This section turns everything into a calendar. You will choose your strongest piece, revise it in passes, run a final rules check, and submit before your regional deadline, with a plan for a portfolio if you are a senior.

Why This Matters

Most winners are not the people who wrote the best first draft. They are people who revised with a method, asked readers for honest feedback, chose the right piece for the right category, and submitted a clean entry on time. The program lets you edit until your regional deadline, and this plan uses that time. Nothing here promises an award. It aims to make your piece the best version of itself and to keep rule problems from getting in the way.

Today is October 20, 2026. Entries opened October 1. Regional deadlines begin December 1, 2026 and vary, with some as late as January 4, 2027, so your window may be about six weeks or about eleven. Find your region's date first, then count backward.

The Revision Passes

Pass	Focus	Question you answer
1. Big picture	Idea, stake, shape	What is this piece really about, and who could lose what?
2. Structure	Order, turn, ending	Does the piece have a felt shape, a formal turn, and an ending that acts?
3. Scene and evidence	Specificity	Where am I explaining instead of showing, or asserting instead of proving?
4. Sentences and diction	Rhythm, word choice	Where should sentences shorten, and which abstractions become images?

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Pass	Focus	Question you answer
5. Mechanics and sources	Proof and polish	Are names, facts, numbers and citations correct, and are slips gone?
6. Rules audit	Compliance	Category, count, anonymity, plain text, fictional names, Work Sources.

Revision Principles

Revise in order: large to small. Do not polish sentences in a paragraph you may cut.

Cut before you add. The research shows high placement does not require length: some recognized poems ran under 20 lines.

Change one thing per pass so you can tell what helped.

Keep dated drafts. The AI policy encourages documenting your process, and a trail of drafts shows your voice developing.

Choosing What to Submit

Pick the piece with the strongest stake and the most specific detail, not the longest or most ambitious.

Match the category to the piece's function (Section 1).

You may enter more than one piece, each in one category. Each individual entry costs 15 dollars, with a fee waiver available.

Seniors may assemble up to two portfolios of six works each (40 dollars per portfolio), with no work repeated across them.

Case Studies: What the Research Shows About Process

These come from profiles and school pages described in the research file. They show correlation, not cause, and several are self-reports.

ENTERING SEVERAL MANUSCRIPTS: 'MAPS TO NOWHERE' (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, NOVEL, 2014; INTERVIEW-BASED)

A junior reported submitting three novels and not expecting this one to win. She described character-first drafting, a deliberately comic-and-sad tone, and run-on sentences and lists used on purpose for backstory. The profile says only four of 570 novel entries earned a gold national medal.

SOLUTION

Takeaway for choosing. Drafting more than one project and picking the strongest excerpt is a legitimate strategy. Her voice choices were deliberate, which fits the criterion of an emerging personal voice.

Takeaway for scarcity. The profile's figure shows how scarce top medals can be in some categories. The research read an interview, not the text, so no craft claims go beyond the interview.

COURSE SUPPORT: A SCREENPLAY ABOUT A MUTE CHILD (GOLD, SCRIPT, 2024; LEVEL NOT SPECIFIED; UNIVERSITY PROGRAM PAGE)

A student wrote her first screenplay in a summer screenwriting course with an instructor, then submitted it. The page says it earned a gold medal but not whether regional or national.

SOLUTION

Takeaway. Structured feedback in a class shortened the learning curve. A protagonist who does not speak forces visual storytelling, which fits the form.

Caution. Because the tier is unspecified, treat this as a process story, not a tier example.

PERSISTENCE AND PORTFOLIO: A SCRIPT WRITER AND A PORTFOLIO WRITER (PROFILES)

A senior who won a script medal reported entering for a third year. A separate Gold Medal Portfolio profile reported mixing a poem, science fiction, humor and an opinion piece, waiting to build courage, and having a teacher's encouragement. An earlier Silver Medal portfolio from the same writer shows two portfolios were allowed.

SOLUTION

Takeaway. Many recognized writers entered more than once and used a teacher as a sponsor. A thematic through-line held a varied portfolio together.

Caution. Current rules bar the same work in two portfolios. Standalone entries are described as allowed, but confirm the current rule on the official page before relying on it.

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CLEAN COPY: RECOGNIZED PIECES WITH VISIBLE SLIPS (GOLD KEY AND SILVER KEY ESSAYS AND FICTION)

The research reported small errors in several recognized pieces: a usage slip, a doubled word, a pronoun slip, unsourced statistics, a misnamed agency, and typos in a Silver Key story.

SOLUTION

Takeaway. Recognition did not require perfect copy, which means concept, voice and structure carried those pieces. It does not mean slips are free.

Practical rule. Sources and spelling are the cheapest improvements you can make. A reader who stumbles on a typo is not reading your ending.

Step-by-Step: A Six-Week Plan

- 1 Week 1: Choose and confirm** Pick the piece and the category, find your region's deadline, count words, and write your entry sheet.
- 2 Week 2: Big-picture revision** Do Passes 1 and 2. Write your stake sentence and mark the turn. Cut at least ten percent.
- 3 Week 3: Feedback** Give the draft to two readers (a teacher and a peer). Ask three questions: Where did you lean in? Where did you drift? What did you infer?
- 4 Week 4: Scene and sentence work** Do Passes 3 and 4. Replace abstractions with images. Read the draft aloud.
- 5 Week 5: Proof and rules** Do Passes 5 and 6. Verify facts, sources and names. Strip identifiers and paste into a plain text editor.
- 6 Week 6: Submit early** Fill out the Portal, list Work Sources honestly, and submit several days before your deadline. Reread the pasted text on screen.

If your deadline is December 1, compress the weeks: do Weeks 1 and 2 in the first ten days, feedback during the third, and keep the last days free for proofing and submission. Do not sacrifice the rules audit.

BEFORE AND AFTER: A FEEDBACK REQUEST THAT GETS USEFUL ANSWERS (COACH SAMPLE)**BEFORE**

Here is my story, tell me what you think.

SOLUTION**AFTER**

Here is my 900-word flash story. Please mark (1) the line where you stopped caring, (2) the line where you leaned in, and (3) what you think happens after the last line.

What changed and why: the first invites compliments. The second asks for observable reader behavior and for inference about the ending, which tells you whether the piece trusts the reader or explains too much.

BEFORE AND AFTER: A WRITER STATEMENT SENTENCE FOR A PORTFOLIO (COACH SAMPLE, SENIOR PORTFOLIO ONLY)**BEFORE**

My portfolio shows that I can write in many styles and I worked really hard on it.

SOLUTION**AFTER**

Across six pieces I return to kitchens, because in my family that is where the unsayable gets said. I chose a poem, a memoir, and a story to see how the same table changes under each form.

What changed and why: the first claims range and effort, which every portfolio says. The second names a through-line, explains deliberate choices, and shows a stance. The Writer Statement runs 100-500 words, is seen by jurors, and must contain no identifying details. The separate Personal Statement is about you and must be a different text. Neither may be AI-generated.

What to Do After You Submit

Submitting is not the end of your writing year. Regional announcements are expected January 27, 2027, and national announcements March 31, 2027, so there is a long quiet stretch. Use it. Start the next piece while the last one is out of your hands. Keep your dated drafts, because they document your process if anyone asks.

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When results arrive, read them for information, not for a verdict. An award tells you one panel responded strongly to one piece in one year. No award tells you the same thing in reverse. Scholastic does not publish judges' comments, so the most useful feedback you will ever get is your own revised reading of the piece a month later. Many recognized writers in the research entered more than once, and a piece that places nowhere this year can be revised and re-entered only if it has not already been awarded, so check the current rules before planning a second round.

Your Final Submission Checklist

- ◆ Eligibility confirmed (grade, age, location) and region deadline noted.
- ◆ Right category; count within the limit (Novel synopsis included; sources excluded for Critical Essay and Journalism).
- ◆ Name, school and teacher removed; real people renamed in nonfiction.
- ◆ Plain text typed or pasted into the Portal box; no PDF, links, images or tables.
- ◆ Line breaks checked for poems and scripts; script excerpts labeled.
- ◆ Work Sources lists influences, collaborators and any permitted AI use.
- ◆ Portfolio (seniors): six pieces within limits, Writer Statement and Personal Statement each 100-500 words and different.
- ◆ Fee paid or waiver requested. Entries submitted early.

Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric or tier percentages. This table is coach inference about how revision and submission habits relate to recognition, built from profiles and the sampled winners. Correlation only.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Multiple passes; cuts; a second reader; a deliberate form; rules audit complete.	Revised once or twice; clear concept; small slips remain.	First or second draft with explanation, summary ending, and slips.
Piece chosen from several; category matches function.	Piece chosen reasonably; category acceptable.	Piece chosen because it was nearest the deadline.
Voice consistent across a body of work (portfolio) or within a piece.	Voice present but uneven.	Voice borrowed or flattened.

Common traps

1. Waiting until the deadline week to choose a piece. 2. Asking readers 'Is it good?' instead of where they stopped caring. 3. Polishing sentences in a draft whose structure is still wrong. 4. Submitting a pasted PDF, a link, or a manuscript with a name in it.

Coach's Playbook

Keep a single folder: dated drafts, feedback notes, the entry sheet and the final plain-text version. Work in the order big, structure, scene, sentence, mechanics, rules. Submit several days early.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes: write your region's deadline at the top of a page, then lay out six weekly checkpoints backward from it and name the piece you will enter.

Practice

WORKSHOP Your Gold Medal Revision and Submission Plan

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Find your region's deadline, and write a countdown with weekly checkpoints from now to that date.
2. List up to three candidate pieces and pick one using the criteria in this section. Explain your choice in three sentences.
3. Write the stake sentence and name the turn for your chosen piece.

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4. Cut ten percent from your draft, then write what you cut and why.
5. Write a feedback request with three observable questions and send it to two readers.
6. Collect and summarize their answers. Decide which one change you will make first.
7. Run the full rules audit on your final draft and fill in an entry sheet.
8. Write a Work Sources note listing influences, collaborators and any permitted AI use.
9. Seniors: outline a six-piece portfolio with a one-sentence through-line and a draft Writer Statement opening.

Notes Coaching Notes and Model Responses

What a strong response to each assignment looks like, and why. Compare after you draft, not before.

01.1 The Official Rules, Categories, and Calendar

WORKSHOP · THE OFFICIAL RULES, CATEGORIES, AND CALENDAR

1. A model entry: 'Lighthouse story, Flash Fiction, 1,000 limit, now 940.' Seeing all three together catches mismatches early. Revisit counts after every revision.
2. A model: 'My true account of a school rule change relies on interviews, so Journalism, not Critical Essay.' The point is a reason tied to what the piece does, not preference.
3. A strong answer commits to one verb. Example: 'It remembers; the main job is rendering one summer and its meaning.' If you need two verbs, consider whether the piece is really two pieces.
4. You are searching for hidden identifiers: a surname in dialogue, a hometown, a team name. Replace with neutral words. Keep the specificity of the detail even when the name changes.
5. Keep the relationship and the emotional truth; change only the name. Readers should feel the person as vividly as before.
6. Expect line breaks, indentation and spacing to flatten. The fix is made inside the Portal box, since that is what jurors see. Re-read the poem aloud after fixing.
7. Model: 'I may use AI to brainstorm or research, I must say so, and the finished work must be mine.' Dated drafts and notes are your proof of process.
8. Model checkpoints: choose category (two weeks out), final proofread (one week out), submit (several days out). Dates are yours, but must precede the regional deadline.
9. Example: 'Influenced by the lyric essays of ... and an interview with my grandmother.' Honest and specific beats vague. Note collaborators there too.

01.2 Anatomy of a Gold Medal Piece

WORKSHOP · ANATOMY OF A GOLD MEDAL PIECE

1. A model map: 'P1 hook object. P2 backstory. P3 argument. P4 concession. P5 return to hook.' Seeing the shape shows where the piece sags or repeats.
2. Model: 'The turn is a one-line paragraph where the narrator stops talking and sets the table.' A formal turn, enacted on the page, is stronger than a sentence that says 'then I realized.'
3. Model: 'Kitchen objects and weather.' Two systems that can collide are better than five unrelated images. Cut images that belong to no family.
4. Example: a repeated 'ask me again' can mean teasing early and plea late. If it means the same thing every time, it is decoration.
5. Model: 'Because I chose to list the spices before naming the illness, the reader feels the loss before the diagnosis.' If you cannot finish the sentence, the choice may be arbitrary.
6. Example: imitating the numbered-attempts structure with a driving test, repeating the scene nine times with one change each. Imitate the move, never the content.
7. Model: 'I was devastated' becomes 'I washed the same cup until the water ran cold.' Check that the action truly signals the feeling and that no commentary follows.
8. Summary: 'I learned to forgive.' Image: 'The porch light stayed on.' Act: 'I knocked.' The act or image usually wins because it trusts the reader.
9. Model: 'Development moves from rumor to evidence. Organization is a ring. Syntax shortens at the reveal. Diction is domestic. The refrain changes meaning. The ending is a gesture.' Six short claims, each tied to the text.

01.3 Silver, Gold Key, Honorable Mention, and No Award: What Separates Each Tier

WORKSHOP · SILVER, GOLD KEY, HONORABLE MENTION, AND NO AWARD: WHAT SEPARATES EACH TIER

1. Model: 'Honorable Mention, Silver Key, Gold Key (regional); American Voices, Silver Medal, Gold Medal (national). No bronze.' Treat the order as the program's structure, not a scale of worth.
2. Examples: a rubric, tier percentages, judges' comments on specific works. These gaps mean any contrast between tiers is inference, and you should test it against your own readers.
3. Model: 'A teenage cook, whose father has stopped eating her dishes, could lose the one routine they share.' A stake can be small and specific, and it need not be dramatic.
4. Model: 'A one-line stanza breaks the pattern at the midpoint.' A strong answer names a visible event on the page, not a thought that changes.

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5. Model: 'Our street is paper-gold this week. / My father rakes it into piles and says nothing about the mailbox. / The wind undoes his work. / He starts again.' Speaker, stake, turn, and a closing act.
6. Model: 'Her thumb pressed the lid down on the pot like a stamp. Sunday, 4 o'clock. The rule was no phones, which she enforced with a wooden spoon.' Concrete, sensory, and no commentary.
7. Model: summary 'I learned to forgive.' Image: 'The porch light stayed on.' Act: 'I knocked.' The act or image usually wins, but read all three aloud before deciding.
8. Example: the Silver Key might have had the same facts and a flatter register, with no formal turn and a closing explanation. Label such claims as inference, since lower-tier texts are not available.
9. A strong answer notes that panels differ, that fields vary by year and region, that the same piece can land differently, and that revision is the only variable you control.

01.4 Your Gold Medal Revision and Submission Plan

WORKSHOP · YOUR GOLD MEDAL REVISION AND SUBMISSION PLAN

1. A model plan: 'Dec 1 deadline. Choose piece Oct 22. Structure revision by Oct 29. Feedback Nov 5. Sentence pass Nov 12. Proof Nov 19. Submit Nov 24.' Real dates are yours, but the order should stay large to small.
2. A strong answer names the piece with the clearest stake and most specific detail. Model: 'I choose the grandfather essay because the scenes carry the feeling and I can cut the reflective middle.'
3. Model: 'The stake is whether the narrator can keep a promise to her brother. The turn is the one-line paragraph where she stops talking and unlocks the door.' If you cannot, write one.
4. Typical cuts: restated sentences, a stock opening, a summary last paragraph. A good note says what the piece gained, such as faster pacing or a stronger ending.
5. Model: 'Mark where you stopped caring, where you leaned in, and what you think happens next.' Specific tasks produce usable answers.
6. Look for places where both readers drifted or both inferred the same thing. Those are your highest-value fixes. Pick one and revise before touching anything else.
7. The entry sheet should list category, limit, count, region deadline, and yes/no on anonymity, plain text, fictional names and Work Sources. If any answer is no, fix it before paying the fee.
8. Model: 'Influences: the lyric essays I read this fall; interview with my aunt for facts; AI used only to brainstorm title options.' Honest, specific and short.
9. Model through-line: 'Six pieces about leaving home in six forms.' The opening of the Writer Statement should name the through-line and one deliberate choice, with no identifying details.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

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