

2025 Lincoln Essay Competition Student Packet



**"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness
in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to
finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds"**

—Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

Hildene's 2025 Lincoln Essay Competition Prompt

"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

- Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861

President Abraham Lincoln took office during a period of extreme political and social polarization. When he delivered his first inaugural address in March of 1861, six states had already seceded from the Union and four more would soon follow suit. Despite his call for unity, the Civil War broke out just one month later and four years of devastating conflict ensued.

When Lincoln was reelected in 1864, and with the Union on the verge of winning the Civil War, the president did not use the occasion of his second inaugural address to deliver a victory speech and thereby widen divisions. He focused instead on reuniting the nation. Urging all Americans to move forward with humility and in a spirit of reconciliation, he counseled, "with malice toward none; with charity for all... let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds."

With this in mind, please answer the following prompt in 500 words or fewer:

The United States is once again deeply divided, politically and on a host of significant issues. Briefly describe how this polarization has impacted you, your community, family, and/or school.* Then detail one action that you or your community, family, or school could take to promote the kind of reconciliation Lincoln spoke of. Explore both the possible challenges and potential positive impacts of this action in justifying why it would be worthwhile.

** For the purposes of this essay, **polarization** refers to the division of a group or society into subgroups with sharply contrasting sets of opinions or beliefs, often leading to increased tension and a reduced willingness to seek compromise or understanding of opposing viewpoints. Polarization can occur in various contexts, such as politics and social issues, and within a broad range of organizational settings and groups. In thinking about which **community** to focus on, students are welcome to choose from a wide variety of groups, ranging from local communities and organizations to statewide, national, global or online environments. Examples include town committees, school clubs, church groups, hunting clubs, sports teams, scout troops, 4-H, neighborhoods, family units, etc., in addition to other peer groups like online fan clubs or gaming platforms.*

OVERVIEW

For the past eighteen years, Hildene has administered the Lincoln Essay Competition informed by our mission: Living the Lincoln Legacy. Using Abraham Lincoln's legacy as touchstone, Hildene seeks to inspire young people to engage in important issues—mindful of the responsibility each of us has to help make our world a better place.

The competition is open to all eighth graders who study in the state of Vermont, whether through an institution or at home, or whose primary residence is in the state of Vermont while attending a designated public school just over the border. Essays will be judged on the student's understanding of the subject, as well as on their ability to convey that understanding through good writing.

The competition is regional. There will be a first, second, and third place winner from each of four regions. Occasionally there are ties. The judges may also select up to four essays for honorable mention from anywhere in the state. As always, essays remain anonymous throughout judging. Students enter the competition according to the region in which their school is located. If the student is home-schooled or their designated public school is across state lines, they should enter according to the region in Vermont where they live. Regions are comprised of counties:

Region One: Grand Isle, Franklin, Orleans, Essex, Lamoille, Caledonia, Washington
 Region Two: Chittenden
 Region Three: Addison, Rutland, Bennington
 Region Four: Orange, Windsor, Windham

Winners will receive certificates and the following cash prizes:

First Place Winners: \$500 each Third Place Winners: \$300 each
 Second Place Winners: \$400 each Up to four Honorable Mentions: \$200 each

Essay Requirements

Essays must:

- be written in English.
- have a title (not included as part of the word count) that reflects the central thesis of the essay.
- be typewritten in Arial font, 12 pt, with 1.15 line spacing
- respond to all parts of the prompt.
- **not** have entrant's name or any other identifier of applicant or applicant's school on essay or within the text of the essay (this helps to ensure that judging remains unbiased).
- **not** reveal the name of any non-public figures or the specific name(s) of the group, team or club so that your entry remains anonymous to the judges. Example: Rather than writing about The Bainbridge Middle School Essay Club, you would refer to it as "my school's essay club."
- be authored and edited by the student (see FAQs & TIPS)
- **not** exceed 500 words and fit on one side of first page; **include word count** at bottom of essay
- include any endnotes and relevant citations on second page, not to exceed second page (alter formatting to fit) (see FAQs & TIPS)
- be sent as a pdf attachment, if submitted electronically.

Awards Luncheon: Each winner/honoree will be invited to an awards luncheon, along with their parents, teacher, and principal as our guests. **We expect all winners/honorees to attend the luncheon.** All first-place essays will be read aloud, preferably by the entrant (although they may choose a reader other than themselves). The celebration will be at Hildene on **Sunday, May 18, 2025.**

Deadline for submissions: Entries are complete if they include: **1) application form** and, **2) essay.** All essays and application forms must arrive at Hildene by **4:30 pm on Wednesday, February 12, 2025,** in one of three ways:

- **Mail:** If you plan to mail, **Please mail at least one week in advance** to ensure arrival. Late entries will not be accepted.
Hildene, The Lincoln Family Home
ATTN: Lincoln Essay Competition
PO Box 377
Manchester, VT 05254
- **Email:** lec@hildene.org with two attachments. The applications must be named "firstname_lastname_LEC_application" and essays "firstname_lastname_LEC_Essay"
- **Hand-deliver:** Deliver sealed packets to Hildene's Welcome Center front desk (1005 Hildene Road, Manchester, VT, 05254). Hildene is currently open 10:00 am to 4:30 pm, Thursday - Monday. Although Hildene will not be open to the public on Wednesday, February 12, staff will be at Hildene's Welcome Center until 4:30 to receive hand deliveries.

PLEASE NOTE: Faxed, and late entries will **not** be accepted.

Notification: All winners will be notified by April 12, 2025. Winners are also announced on Hildene's website by 4pm, April 12. Non-winners will be notified thereafter via mail. Be sure your address is legible and USPS-acceptable. In other words, if your family gets mail in a P.O. Box, please be sure to list that instead of a street address. We will be mailing guest passes to all participants.

Disclaimer: Hildene reserves the right to publish winning essays, unaltered (with the exception of formatting), on any media. Authors will be credited but not compensated.

Where to find info: ALL materials are either included in the paper mailing received by your school or may be found on Hildene's website: https://hildene.org/learning/lincoln_essay.

Please read the entire 10-page packet so that you are well-positioned to participate.

Questions: Contact Stephanie Moffett-Hynds at stephanie@hildene.org or 802.367.7960.

APPLICATION FORM - Please print legibly!

Applicant's Name: (first) _____ (last) _____

Region: One ____ Two ____ Three ____ Four ____ Date of Birth: _____ Current Grade: _____

Home Telephone Number: _____ Email Address: _____

Home **USPS Mailing Address** PO Box: _____ Street Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Are you submitting this essay as a Home Study student?: Yes ____ No ____

Name of School: _____

School Telephone Number: _____ School website: _____

Teacher's Name: _____ Email Address: _____

Teacher's Telephone Number: _____ Extension: _____

Principal's Name: _____ Email Address: _____

Student Pledge: By signing below, I certify that I live or go to school in Vermont and **that the submitted essay is my own work and not AI-generated.** I authorize Hildene to use my work in all future related events and publications without compensation and I understand that if I am a winner, I must attend the luncheon in order to receive my prize. If my essay wins 1st place, it will be read aloud. *In the event that the luncheon is canceled due to unforeseen circumstances, students will be asked to video record the reading of their essay, and recordings will be published on Hildene's YouTube channel. **I have also completed the checklist on the back of this form.**

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Print your name: _____

Teacher/Adviser Pledge: I certify that I have read all the contents of the competition packet, that the essay is the student's original work and that it meets all the requirements of Hildene's Lincoln Essay Competition. **Teachers/Advisers - if you are unable to sign student forms due to extenuating circumstances, please send an email to lec@hildene.org certifying each student's compliance.*

Teacher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Print your name: _____ Is this your first time participating? _____

Parent/Guardian Pledge: I certify that I have read all the contents of the competition packet, that the essay is the student's original work and that it meets all the requirements of Hildene's Lincoln Essay Competition.

Parent's Signature: _____ Date: _____ Phone: _____

Print your name: _____ Email Address: _____

Essay and application Submission Deadline: Wednesday, February 12, 2025, no later than 4:30 pm
Please note: Faxed or late entries will not be accepted. Please be sure the address used for applicant on this application form is that used for U.S. mail delivery.

ESSAY PROMPT, 2025

The United States is once again deeply divided, politically and on a host of significant issues. Briefly describe how this polarization has impacted you, your community, family, and/or school. Then detail one action that you or your community, family, or school could take to promote the kind of reconciliation Lincoln spoke of. Explore both the possible challenges and potential positive impacts of this action in justifying why it would be worthwhile.

CHECKLIST FOR STUDENTS

Complete this checklist before submitting your essay and application form:

- I read the entire application packet, including the FAQ's & Tips and The Judges Rubric.
- I briefly described how polarization has impacted me, my community, family, and/or school.
- I detailed one action that I or my community, family or school could take to promote the kind of reconciliation Lincoln spoke of.
- I explored the possible challenges of pursuing this action.
- I explored the potential positive impacts of this action in justifying why it would be worthwhile.
- I checked my essay using The Judges' Assessment Rubric to make sure I have satisfied all the requirements for writing a strong essay.
- I typed my (500 word or fewer) essay on **one** side of a page **only**, included **a word count on the bottom**, and a **title at the top**.
- I provided a fitting title to reflect the thesis of my essay.
- I put all citations on the **reverse side**.
- I used Arial font, at 12 pt. and 1.15 pt. spacing.
- I made sure not to include my name on or in the essay, nor did I include the name of my school or any identifiers that would reveal my local community.
- For mailed entries: I am mailing it at least one week in advance of the deadline.
- For emailed entries: I am submitting via email to: lec@hildene.org. I will send one email with two attachments: the essay titled "firstname_lastname_LEC_Essay," and completed application form titled "firstname_lastname_LEC_application" before 4:30pm on Wednesday, February 12.

Signatures, application form: Protocols with regard to extenuating circumstances may require teachers and/or parents and caregivers to submit emailed "signatures." Signatures may be submitted via email or mail, and in the form of a simple acknowledgment. Acknowledgments cannot come from entrants' own email address.

Home-schooled students are required one adult signature only, from a 1) teacher, or 2) parent/guardian.

FAQs & TIPS

What is plagiarism and how do I prevent it? Plagiarism is the use of another's work, words, or ideas without giving them proper credit and is thus a form of academic dishonesty. It is fine and even encouraged to reference someone else's ideas or work, if you've used them in making your argument; it's just not okay to pass them off as your own. It is the conclusions you draw from having learned from others that are your own ideas. The same ethical standard should be applied to the use of AI with regards to writing your essay: it is a form of dishonesty to pass off AI-generated work as your own (more on that below). To avoid plagiarism, include citations.

May others write my essay or parts of my essay? No. The essay must be the original work of the submitting student. While editorial comment or guidance from fellow students, teachers, parents or other advisers is permissible, the actual writing and editing decisions must be the student's own work and reflect their own voice. Both students and advisers should be conscious of the fine line between acceptable guidance vs. unacceptable collaboration. Anyone advising students should keep this in mind when offering guidance. For example, it is okay to ask students to come up with sources, but not okay to pick the sources out for the students. It is okay to indicate where there are grammatical errors, but not okay to tell the student specifically how to correct them. While advisers may guide the process, it must remain first and foremost student-driven and result in an essay that truly reflects each student's thoughts, voice and ability.

Let's address the elephant in the room: What about using AI to write the essay? While it is permissible to use AI to assist your research, you may not use it to write your essay. Apart from the fact that claiming such material as your own is a form of academic dishonesty (and that this is, after all, a writing competition), it also robs you of the benefits of conducting and analyzing your own research to formulate your own thoughts and voice. Look to Abraham Lincoln: One could argue that his integrity and perseverance actually stem in part from the confidence he gained by taking the time to read, reflect, puzzle over, revise, and work out in writing the problems facing the nation as well as the steps to heal it. Such a process allows for a deeper connection to the subject matter and promotes nuanced thinking. We see this over and over again in Abraham Lincoln's writing. Although he was greatly influenced by the thoughts and work of others, he synthesized and built upon those contributions to create essays and addresses that ring with his own voice and reflect his convictions. It is Hildene's hope that you will experience the same sense of accomplishment, finding your own words to express your thoughts—a skill you will find invaluable throughout your life. To this end, the student, teacher and parent/guardian must each sign the oath on the attached application form attesting to the originality of the essay submitted. If the teacher is unable to sign student application forms due to extenuating circumstances, they must send an email to: lec@hildene.org certifying each student's compliance.

What are citations and how do I include them? Don't let the citation process intimidate you. Just do the best you can using the following guidelines. If, in your essay, you attribute a quote or idea to someone or to a group, you will assign a number to that reference and then provide the details in a corresponding endnote on the back of your essay. Your bibliography should be included there, as well, which will list any sources you examined while researching the topic.

To see examples of citations in past winning essays, visit:

<https://hildene.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2023-LEC-Winners.pdf>

To learn how to include citations, use one of these resources recommended by Vermont librarians:

1. Purdue Owl Writing Lab at: owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_formatting_and_style_guide.html
2. ZoteroBib, at: zbib.org (Fast, free bibliography generator - MLA, APA, Chicago, Harvard citations)
3. Noodletools Free Tools at: noodletools.com/free
4. Mybib at: mybib.com (Free APA, Harvard, & MLA Citation Generator)
5. Suggestions for citing generative AI tools at: style.mla.org/citing-generative-ai

Please also feel free to use the organizer template that a recent LEC winner created to help him keep track of his sources and organize his thoughts: hildene.org/sites/default/files/pdf/LEC_Steps_to_Success_student_organizer.pdf

How will my essay be judged? Essays are judged on overall effectiveness, organization and development, use of language, mechanics and grammar. Please refer to the attached Judges' Assessment Rubric which should serve as a writer's guideline for you. The judges come from a variety of backgrounds, ethnicities, geographical locations, vocations, religions, genders, etc., and include a mix of new and repeat judges every year. The judges never see anything that identifies the student, their address or the school they attend.

If my essay wins an award, do I need to attend the luncheon? Yes! We ask that all winners, including honorable mention, attend the awards luncheon at which time all first-place essays will be read aloud. The winners, honorable mentions, their parents, teachers and principals will be Hildene's guests at this special event held annually to honor Abraham Lincoln's legacy. The awards luncheon will be at Hildene on Sunday, May 18, 2025 followed by a tour of The Lincoln Family Home.

Submissions by Teachers: If you, as the teacher, are submitting one or more submissions via email, please include each student's application form and essay as individual attachments.

Can I submit via multiple means? Yes, if necessary, but it is not recommended. If submitting pieces of the application separately, indicate that you are doing so.

Tips on Writing a Winning Essay: What We've Learned

- Set deadlines for research, submitted notes and drafts, and feedback from parents and/or teachers to ensure you have enough time to complete the entire process.
- Enjoy the process of researching. The Hildene essay question changes every year and provides an opportunity for students to speak with an expert on the topic, view online podcasts or video, take a field trip, read a variety of related materials and so forth. Brainstorm with other students about places where you can locate reliable and relevant information.
- Break the prompt down into each of its parts and check that your essay addresses all aspects of the assignment. **One of the biggest reasons an essay does not advance to the final round is because the student has not fully answered every element of the question.** Teachers can help you to understand exactly what is being asked by analyzing the prompt. This will guide your research as well as your writing. There is also a checklist on the back of your application form to help you with this.
- Check your grammar and mechanics (sentence structure, spelling, capitalization, punctuation). Essays with these problems almost never make it to the final round.
- Assess and strengthen your essay using the attached rubric as a tool. Do you have a strong beginning, middle and end? Did you support your position with relevant examples, facts and logic? Many essays start out with a strong introduction and make excellent points, but then fizzle out at the end. Give some thought to how you'll bring your essay to a compelling conclusion.
- Seek ongoing appropriate feedback from your language arts teacher, history teacher, reading specialist, parent, school or town librarian or other knowledgeable persons for improving your grammar, punctuation, factual accuracy, thinking process and syntax. They may give guidance (point out where there might be a problem), as long as you are the one who determines the adjustments and makes the editing decisions.
- Read your essay aloud, or have someone else read it aloud to you, to see if it flows logically and to hear if there are any awkward or incomplete sentences.
- If you are mailing your essay to Hildene, please postmark your entry **at least a week** before the deadline to ensure it arrives on time. Faxed or late submissions will not be accepted.

WHAT IS HILDENE, THE LINCOLN FAMILY HOME?

For 70 years, Hildene was home to three generations of direct descendants of Abraham and Mary Lincoln. It was built in 1905 by presidential son, statesman and successful industrialist Robert Lincoln and his wife Mary Harlan Lincoln, with the intention that it be their ancestral home.

Annually, over 40,000 guests from far and wide visit the 412-acre estate. While rooted in Lincoln's values, Hildene is focused on 21st century social, environmental and educational goals as seen through the lens of history, preservation, conservation and sustainability.

No matter how people interact with Hildene, our goal is for them to leave thinking about the world in a deeper way. We believe people are hungry for meaningful involvement with their community, their state, their country and the world. Hildene works to inspire them to act.



The JUDGES' ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

HIGHEST
SCORE
↓
5

LOWEST
SCORE
↓
1

2

3

4

Answering the Prompt

Answers all prompt components fully; includes only relevant supporting information; reflects depth of thought

Answers the prompt fully but strays slightly off topic or lacks depth of thought

Answers the prompt but strays off topic and lacks depth of thought

Answers most but not all of the prompt

Barely addresses the prompt

Organization & Effectiveness of Argument

Logical progression with clear beginning, middle, and end; cohesive internal paragraph structure; definitive thesis, compelling arguments that lead to a strong conclusion, sophisticated transitions

Logical progression with clear beginning, middle, and end; good internal paragraph structure; clear thesis, argument, and conclusion

Logical progression with clear beginning, middle, and end; good internal paragraph structure; unclear thesis, unclear conclusion, and/or awkward transitions

Logical progression with beginning, middle, and end; weak internal paragraph structure; unclear thesis and conclusion, and awkward transitions

Gaps in logical progression or redundancies; unclear beginning, middle, and/or end; lacks thesis or conclusion

Use of Language and Vocabulary

Effective, nuanced, expressive use of language, vocabulary and with a clear voice throughout

Effective use of language and vocabulary

Adequate use of language and vocabulary, but unrefined; few obvious errors

Occasional imprecise use of language and vocabulary

Largely ineffective use of language and vocabulary

Mechanics and Grammar

No mechanical or grammatical errors; syntax is varied and effective; punctuation is appropriate

Total of 1-2 minor mechanical or grammatical errors which do not significantly affect the meaning; some syntactical variation

Total of 3-5 minor mechanical or grammatical errors which do not significantly affect the meaning; little to no syntactical variation

More than 5 minor mechanical or grammatical errors; errors do not significantly affect the meaning; little to no syntactical variation

Errors that significantly affect the meaning of the essay or impede readability