



Criteria for Judging Nonfiction

Nonfiction writing reflects real people, places, and events. It may be literary nonfiction such as a memoir that presents facts injected with life and color or it may be informative nonfiction designed to present factual information such as histories, travel guides, or biographies. Nonfiction must be true, based on facts, and designed to inform readers.

What does good nonfiction look like? Mark Twain described how a good writer treats sentences: “At times he may indulge himself with a long one, but he will make sure there are no folds in it, no vagueness, no parenthetical interruptions of its view as a whole; when he has done with it, it won’t be a sea-serpent with half of its arches under the water; it will be a torch-light procession.” The same could be said for all good nonfiction: it’s clear.

These categories and levels provide a consistent measurement scale for evaluating entries. Judges are encouraged to add notes for writers, with suggestions and reactions to the material which will help writers understand their scores and improve.

	Exceeds Standards	Meets Average Standards	Below Standards
Meaning and Ideas Worth 30 points	Hooks the reader with a premise so unique, engaging, or provocative that he or she can’t put the writing down. Develops ideas with interesting, well substantiated examples and evidence. Reader finishes the piece feeling well taught. (23-30 points)	Develops ideas clearly and uses relevant details to explain points. Ideas may be interesting, but perhaps not thought through carefully sometimes. (11-22 points)	Writing lacks a hook to draw the reader into the text and the premise is vague or unclear. (0-10 points)
Organization and Pacing Worth 30 points	The author structures and organizes the material so that it is easily understood. The writer carefully chooses which elements to reveal and when so that the reader is expertly guided through the material. Riveting opening and insightful conclusion. The content is paced perfectly so that the reader is engaged and eager to read what comes next. (23-30 points)	Introduction intrigues reader. The writer groups the supporting material logically and provides the reader with transitions between points. Clear conclusion. The material is usually interesting, but the pacing may be a little too slow or fast with the wrong amount of detail to develop the ideas. (11-22 points)	The text does not build logically from one concept to the next. It might lack transitions or contain content unrelated to the primary topic. Some sections might be too long or too short, showing that the writer is still learning about pacing. (0-10 points)

	Exceeds Standards	Meets Average Standards	Below Standards
Style and Language Use Worth 20 points	The narrative effectively includes precise words and phrases, vivid descriptive details, and/or sensory language to convey experiences and events. Author shows an advanced mastery of the language by varying sentence structures and lengths, and by creating an effective tone. (15-20 points)	Writing shows correct word choices, varied sentences, and mostly concise prose. While correct, the style might lack the precision and panache of a more advanced writer. (6-14 points)	Limited word choices and mostly simple sentences. Prose might be too wordy. Tone might not be appropriate for non-fiction. (0-5 points)
Authenticity and Voice Worth 10 points	The reader gets the sense that the author has personal experience with the topic or has conducted extensive, thorough research. Overall, the reader feels that a talented writer with a distinct voice has left them satisfied and well-taught. (7-10 points)	The author has experience with the topic or has conducted supporting research. The writer's voice and unique perspective is evident. (4-6 points)	Reader questions the veracity of the information. The writer does not come across as an expert on the topic because the ideas are not explained out or backed with evidence and examples. (0-3 points)
Discretionary Points Worth 10 points	Reader wants to read the piece several times. The writing vibrates with an energy that can't be forgotten or ignored. The piece leaves the reader feeling well instructed by a master teacher, maybe with a fresh view of the topic. (7-10 points)	Reading the piece is a good experience, but the work shows some unevenness in presentation. Demonstrates good word choice, organization, and message, but might sometimes feel confusing or might not always engage the reader. (4-6 points)	Errors make the work difficult to understand or distract the reader from the message. The author might still be in the learning stages of how to guide a reader through a series of ideas. (0-3 points)

Judges will provide comments including their reactions to the material, with positive feedback and suggestions for improvement. These comments might include how they responded to the work: emotional or intellectual response while reading; places where they were most interested or least engaged; parts that confused them; or sections or ideas that piqued their curiosity or where they would have liked to have read more.

