

UNIVERSITY INTERSCHOLASTIC LEAGUE

READY WRITING CONTEST

HIGH SCHOOL TOPICS

STATE • 2023

Read both of the following statements carefully; then write an expository essay on a topic clearly related to one or the other of the two statements. **Provide your own title.** You are not expected to write on both topics.

Contestants who are hand-writing their compositions must use their own standard 8 1/2 x 11-inch ruled white notebook paper or typing paper, or the paper provided by the host school.

Contestants shall write or print the composition **in ink and on only one side of the paper.** If contestants choose to use their own laptop computers, they must bring portable printers and associated hardware, software and paper. The typed entry must be single-sided and double-spaced, using any standard 12-point font on 8 1/2 x 11-inch white paper. When printing the contest on an electronic printer, the print command must be started by the time contest time expires. Students who opt to compose their entries on computers accept the risk of computer malfunction. In case of computer malfunction, the contestant may use the remaining allotted time to complete the composition in handwriting or compose on another computer (if available).

Ready Writing prompts are provided as springboards for thought, not to advocate particular points of view. Contestants should not conclude that quotations or statements used in prompts reflect the opinion of the UIL.

Topic I

“Outer space. There’s just something about it that brings out one’s inner child. It feels so human to look up and wonder: What is out there? Until that is, Orwellian headlines celebrating The Billionaire Space Race pulls you back down to Earth. The richest man on the planet blew \$5.5 billion on an eleven-minute joyride. Earthlings seem to be in a series of existential crises: democratic decadence, rising authoritarianism, the climate crisis, rampant inequality, a plague. It’s hard to imagine whatever comes next not being either a period of reckoning or of collapse. Space exploration needs to center on the betterment of humanity, not the vanity of the obscenely wealthy. A society where people in power have no sense of social responsibility, where progression without regard for ethics is the status quo, isn’t a future any of us should be proud of leaving behind for our children. At best, it’s space travel and nothing else.

Jeff Bezos himself has conceded critics of wealthy space travel are mostly right. People with wealth and power seem to have a singular guiding principle. Might is right. Seduced by delusions of grandeur, it’s as if they imagine the worst imaginable dystopias and spend our collective time and resources scheming towards them. *Conquistadors* who come for the small-town bookstore first, then the lion’s share of the market, and now that they’ve amassed so, so, so

much of the wealth — the moon. If we do things their way, they'll be the lords of space stations, of colonies, of space itself. Cultural fears of capitalism exploiting space's resources after sucking the Earth dry are pervasive through the science fiction genre for a reason. *Avatar*, *Interstellar*, or even *Wall-E* show what to expect if the world ends. These cautionary tales demonstrate the stakes are high *if* humanity does not grapple with this moral scarcity of those in wealth and power.

If billionaires really cared about the value of space exploration, they would be funding public resources like NASA or other research institutions instead of their own private ventures. Or at least pay *some* taxes. They'd be investing in the future of science by supporting public education — bringing underrepresented people into STEM to expand our wealth of knowledge, our diversity of thought. No one achieves anything alone, least of all anything as complicated as putting human beings into literal outer space. Scientific discourse depends on critical thought and pushback without being tethered to moneyed interests. Titillating investors in Silicon Valley won't be what takes us to Mars. So, no, the billionaire space race is not an accomplishment for humanity. It's a cry for help. Thankfully it seems people are clear on this, or at least united in their anger. If you took so much as a passing glance at the internet during the week of their voyages you might have found an endless supply of merciless memes. Not to mention the petition to "Keep Jeff Bezos in Space." It seemed even NASA wanted to troll when they changed their definition of an astronaut right after Bezos' flight. They added a clever little asterisk that used to go without saying: Astronauts benefit the public in some discernible way. A subtle act of defiance against crony capitalism's intended takeover of the Space industry.

There's so much to remain curious about, and even more to be excited about. In the mix of all this uncertainty, we've received some fascinating, wacky, terrifyingly exciting news about what's out there. Light has been detected from a black hole. Spiritual or otherwise, optimistic or not, how do you not take that as a bright hopeful sign of what's out there, of what there is to discover (Or at least take a moment to go, "Huh, well isn't that something?")? The US government has done something uncharacteristic and told us at least part of the truth about UFOs. We know there are things on Earth that currently can't be explained by anything known on Earth. If that doesn't make one wonder, I can't imagine what will (who knows, maybe the Storm Area 51 Movement will come back and fill in the gaps). There's still so much to learn, to know, to look forward to.

Space exploration is in many ways the perfect metaphor for the human condition. It is boundless, whimsical, hard to fully imagine, and at times impossible to explain or comprehend. There's plenty to fear, and even more unknowns. Yet the sheer infinity of possibilities within the larger universe is a beautiful enough reason to celebrate, to feel joy, or dare I say, hope. In a lifetime, where theoretically you can do anything (without negating issues of privilege and access) it's no wonder space remains such a presence on Earth. When children dream of space (the people this is supposed to be all for), they dream of meeting aliens, journeying through uncharted territory, answering larger questions of the universe. They imagine flying spaceships, fighting alongside Jedi Knights, or befriending ET. They wonder what is there to discover. If given the chance, future generations may be able to unravel an incomprehensible mystery of the universe or two.

But first, we need to make sure there is a planet Earth for them to take off from, rather than play astronaut while it's still not too late."

--Francesca Gabrielle Bavaro, American
Blog Writer, *Why Do People Care About
Space?* August 9, 2021

TOPIC II

“Americans love Mexican food. We consume nachos, tacos, burritos, tortas, enchiladas, tamales and anything resembling Mexican in enormous quantities. We love Mexican beverages, happily knocking back huge amounts of tequila, mezcal, and Mexican beer every year. We love Mexican people—we sure employ a lot of them. Despite our attitudes towards immigration, we demand that Mexicans cook a large percentage of the food we eat, grow the ingredients we need to make that food, clean our houses, mow our lawns, wash our dishes, and look after our children. As any chef will tell you, our entire service economy—the restaurant business as we know it—in most American cities, would collapse overnight without Mexican workers. Some, of course, like to claim that Mexicans are “stealing American jobs.” But in two decades as a chef and employer, I never had ONE American kid walk in my door and apply for a dishwashing job, a porter’s position—or even a job as a prep cook. Mexicans do much of the work in this country that Americans, probably, simply won’t do.

We love Mexican drugs. Maybe not you personally, but “we,” as a nation, certainly consume titanic amounts of them—and go to extraordinary lengths and expense to acquire them. We love Mexican music, Mexican beaches, Mexican architecture, interior design, Mexican films.

So, why don't we love Mexico?

We throw up our hands and shrug at what happens and what is happening just across the border. Maybe we are embarrassed. Mexico, after all, has always been there for us, to service our darkest needs and desires. Whether it’s dress up like fools or get sunburned on spring break in Cancun or get toasted on Mexican drugs, we are seldom on our best behavior in Mexico. They have seen many of us at our worst. They know our darkest desires.

In the service of our appetites, we spend billions and billions of dollars each year on Mexican drugs—while at the same time spending billions and billions more trying to prevent those drugs from reaching us. The effect on our society is everywhere to be seen. Whether it’s kids nodding off and overdosing in small town Vermont, gang violence in L.A., burned out neighborhoods in Detroit—it’s there to see. What we don’t see, however, haven’t really noticed, and don’t seem to much care about, is the 80,000 dead in Mexico, just in the past few years—mostly innocent victims. Eighty thousand families who’ve been touched directly by the so-called “War On Drugs.”

Mexico. Our brother from another mother. A country, with whom, like it or not, we are inexorably, deeply involved, in a close but often uncomfortable embrace. Look at it. It’s beautiful. It has some of the most ravishingly beautiful beaches on Earth. Mountains, desert, jungle. Beautiful colonial architecture, a tragic, elegant, violent, ludicrous, heroic, lamentable, heartbreaking history. Mexican wine country rivals Tuscany for gorgeousness. Its archeological sites—the remnants of great empires, unrivaled anywhere. And as much as we think we know and love it, we have barely scratched the surface of what Mexican food really is. It is NOT melted cheese over tortilla chips. It is not simple, or easy. It is not simply “bro food” at halftime. It is in fact, old—older even than the great cuisines of Europe, and often deeply complex, refined, subtle, and sophisticated. A true mole sauce, for instance, can take DAYS to make, a balance of freshly (always fresh) ingredients painstakingly prepared by hand. It could be, should be, one of the most exciting cuisines on the planet, if we paid attention. The old school cooks of Oaxaca make some of the more difficult and nuanced sauces in gastronomy. And some of the new generation—many of whom have trained in the kitchens of America and Europe—have returned home to take Mexican food to new and thrilling heights.

It's a country I feel particularly attached to and grateful for. In nearly 30 years of cooking professionally, just about every time I walked into a new kitchen, it was a Mexican guy who looked after me, had my back, showed me what was what, and was there—and on the case—when the cooks like me, with backgrounds like mine, ran away to go skiing or surfing or simply flaked. I have been fortunate to track where some of those cooks come from, to go back home with them. To small towns populated mostly by women—where in the evening, families gather at the town's phone kiosk, waiting for calls from their husbands, sons and brothers who have left to work in our kitchens in the cities of the North. I have been fortunate enough to see where that affinity for cooking comes from, to experience moms and grandmothers preparing many delicious things, with pride and real love, passing that food made by hand from their hands to mine.

In years of making television in Mexico, it's one of the places we, as a crew, are happiest when the day's work is over. We'll gather around a street stall and order soft tacos with fresh, bright, delicious salsas, drink cold Mexican beer, sip smoky mezcals, and listen with moist eyes to sentimental songs from street musicians. We will look around and remark, for the hundredth time, what an extraordinary place this is.

The received wisdom is that Mexico will never change. That it is hopelessly corrupt, from top to bottom. That it is useless to resist—to care, to hope for a happier future. But there are heroes out there who refuse to go along. People who are standing up against overwhelming odds, demanding accountability, demanding change—at great, even horrifying personal cost.”

--Anthony Bourdain (1956-2018), American Chef
and Traveling Documentarian, “On Mexicans,”
Parts Unknown: Mexico City and Oaxaca,
May 4, 2014