



## Youth Visions & Voices of the Outdoors

### South Dakota State Parks Essay Contest

**Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the South Dakota Parks & Wildlife Foundation**

#### Submission Prompt

*For 40 years, the South Dakota Parks & Wildlife Foundation has helped ensure that South Dakota state parks remain places where families and friends can make lasting memories - camping under the stars, hiking scenic trails, telling stories around a campfire, and spending time together outdoors.*

*To help us celebrate SDPWF's 40th anniversary, students are invited to write an essay describing a memorable experience they've had in a South Dakota state park (or one they hope to have someday). Explain why state parks are important places for making memories and why these experiences matter for families, communities, and future generations.*

#### Submission Requirements

- The participant must be a resident of and a student in the state of South Dakota.
- Eligible Grades: **6th, 7th, and 8th** or, if home schooled, at the age associated with the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, or 8th grade as submitted to the SD Department of Education.
- The essay must be the student's original work and only one entry per student may be submitted.
- By entering this contest, the student gives the South Dakota Parks & Wildlife Foundation unrestricted rights and permissions for use of the essay.
- Length: **3-5 paragraphs** or 250-500 words
- Format:
  - The essay may be handwritten or typed on a computer.
  - If handwritten, it must be on 8-1/2" by 11" **wide-ruled white paper**, written in pencil or ink **only on the front** of each page, and written neatly with **no cross-outs**.
  - If done on a computer, it must be on 8-1/2" by 11" plain white paper using a **12-point font**, printed **only on the front** of each page.
  - The participant's name should not be written anywhere on the front of the essay. This is to ensure that all essays can be judged anonymously.
- Each essay should include:
  - One completed entry form with all necessary signatures
  - An essay title
  - An introduction that explains the park memory or experience
  - Vivid details that help the reader picture the park and activities
  - An explanation of why the memory or experience is/was meaningful
  - A conclusion reflecting on why state parks matter - and why they will matter in the future

## Why This Contest Matters

This contest celebrates making memories in South Dakota state parks and invites students to capture the important role state parks play in family traditions, outdoor recreation, and lifelong experiences through art that honors the past while inspiring the next generation of park visitors.

## Curriculum Standards Alignment (Grades 6–8)

### English Language Arts – Common Core (CCSS)

- **SD 6.W.3, SD7.W.3, SD8.W.3**

Write narratives that develop real or imagined experiences using descriptive details and well-structured event sequences.

- **SD6.W.4, SD7.W.4, SD8.4.4**

Produce clear and coherent writing appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

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## Finalists

### Finalists

One (1) Overall Winner and Nine (9) finalists will be chosen

- The Nine (9) finalists will be comprised of three (3) finalists from each grade level: 6th, 7th, and 8th

### Finalist Awards

Each finalist will receive:

- An **Annual South Dakota State Park Pass**, allowing their family to enjoy all South Dakota State Parks for the remainder of the park season
- A **VIP invitation to the Youth Visions & Voices of the Outdoors Showcase at the Journey Museum in Rapid City**, May 8, 2026 where finalists will be recognized and read their submission
- **One-night lodging at a Ramkota Companies Hotel** in Rapid City on May 8, 2026
- **A \$50 gas card**

### Overall Winner Award

In addition to the finalist awards, the Overall Winner will receive:

- An **outdoor gear package from Scheels** to help create even more park memories
- **A \$100 Go Outdoors South Dakota gift card**

### Teacher Recognition

School teachers who submit student entries will receive an **Annual South Dakota State Park Pass**

## How to Submit Entries

### Teachers can submit entries by:

By scanning/saving batches of submissions as a PDF and emailing to [assistance@parkswildlifefoundation.org](mailto:assistance@parkswildlifefoundation.org) (**preferred method**)

**OR Mailing to: SD Parks & Wildlife Foundation | 19619 Trout Loop | Spearfish, SD 57783**

SDPWF will confirm receipt via email to the teacher. If you do not receive email confirmation, please contact us at the above email address or by calling 605-773-4503.

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## Important Dates

- Entries postmarked OR emailed no later than **Tuesday, March 17, 2026**
- Finalists announced **Friday, April 17, 2026** through communication to teachers.
- Award ceremony and showcase the evening of **Friday, May 8, 2026** at the Rapid City Journey Museum to publicly announce and recognize finalists.

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## FAQ's

### How will submission be judged?

Submissions will be judged by community leaders throughout the state. Finalists will be chosen based on submission originality, how closely the submission aligns with the prompt, submission requirements, theme of the contest, and curriculum standards above. Finalists will not be judged on the reading of their submission.

### What if a finalist cannot attend the Youth Visions & Voices of the Outdoors Showcase due to financial constraints or prior commitments?

Teachers, if a financial need exists please contact us so that we may assist in providing additional support for the student's family. If finalists are unable to attend due to prior commitments, we ask that a video recording of the finalist reading their submission be sent so that we may show it and recognize the student during the award ceremony.

### Are teachers, family, and friends welcome at the Youth Visions & Voices of the Outdoors Showcase?

Certainly! We welcome all who can come to celebrate our finalists.

### Do finalists have to read their own submission at the Youth Visions & Voices of the Outdoors Showcase?

We highly encourage finalists to read their own submissions, however if they need assistance from someone else, please let us know so we can accommodate.

**Other Questions?** – Reach out to us at [assistance@parkswildlifefoundation.org](mailto:assistance@parkswildlifefoundation.org) or 605-773-4503.



### Essay Contest Entry Form

**Please include this completed form with each essay. Type or print clearly & fill-in completely.**

**Student Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Teacher Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Teacher Email Address:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Teacher Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**School Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**School Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Title of essay:** \_\_\_\_\_

**ALL SIGNATURES ARE REQUIRED.**

**Originality Certification**

I hereby certify that the essay is original to me and that it is not copied from any other person's work.

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Student Signature

Date

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Teacher Signature

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Date

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Questions, comments, and concerns may be directed to Elena Dagit at 605-773-4503 or  
[assistance@parkswildlifefoundation.org](mailto:assistance@parkswildlifefoundation.org)

**Teachers can submit entries:**

By scanning/saving batches of submissions as a PDF and emailing to [\(preferred method\)](mailto:assistance@parkswildlifefoundation.org)

**OR** Mailing to: SD Parks & Wildlife Foundation | 19619 Trout Loop | Spearfish, SD 57783

**Submissions must be postmarked or emailed no later than Tuesday, March 17, 2026.  
Winners will be notified by April 17, 2026**