



## Spotlight on: Using external opportunities to support student skill building and engagement

Adapted from the Sept/Oct 2024 issue of *The VMP Chronicle*, a bimonthly newsletter for educators.

The Maurice R. Hilleman Essay Contest was established in 2019 to ensure that Dr. Hilleman's remarkable legacy will thrive and inspire future generations, but it is more than that. Maurice R. Hilleman rose from humble beginnings to become one of the most exceptional scientists in history. He dreamed of a world free from the ravages of infectious diseases, and as he chased those dreams, he developed more than half of the routinely recommended vaccines children receive today. His work is estimated to save 8 million lives every year.

Educators know the importance of student dreams and how encouraging those dreams and helping students chart a course toward them can make all the difference. Part of positioning students for the future they seek is ensuring not only that they learn what you are teaching, but also that they are engaged and excited along the way.

During the past several years of holding this essay contest, we have witnessed how educators have leveraged the contest to meet some of these goals. So, as a new school year begins, we wanted to share what we have seen and heard from teachers like you.

*Both Edison and Hilleman inspire me not because of their success, but of how they achieved that success. They've taught me that science is not made from brilliance. Rather, science awards character, hard work, and determination. Knowing that discovery and invention are achieved through determination, is life-changing for me.*

— **Essay contest winner**

*We appreciate the opportunity for him to participate and we're proud of him for his efforts. Winning isn't always being selected but being a part of the experience and showing strong work ethic and dedication to deliver your best.*

— **Parent of contest entrant**

## Using external opportunities to support student skill building and engagement



*Critical thinking is a superpower if you think about it, and the contest is a tool to help develop this superpower. In today's world, it is especially important.*

— **Contest collaborator**

### Skill building

As scientists and science educators, we know the importance of critical thinking skills in the 21st Century. As with adults, students need to learn to separate good from bad information and make decisions informed by knowledge generated through scientific inquiry.

The essay contest offers a unique way for students to exercise their critical thinking skills. First, they need to respond to a prompt, so they need to identify a relevant topic, research it and develop a point of view. Further, the process of distilling the facts and developing a cohesive argument through writing, requires them to work with and mold the information into a compelling narrative.

Activities, like the contest, that enable students to practice multiple skills at the same time and in different contexts can reinforce individual skills learned more formally in the classroom, such as researching information, fact checking, developing an outline, writing, editing, organizing a project, and managing time.

While the essay contest can be useful for in-class assignments, it can also offer something beyond academics. Working on a project that asks you to think about and research your own point of view and communicate it to others is a valuable independent experience.

Although we are pleased to award the winning students with cash prizes and recognize them at a celebratory event, our goal is that each student take something positive from their experience.

### Ways to use the contest

Here are some of the ways teachers and others have engaged students with the contest:

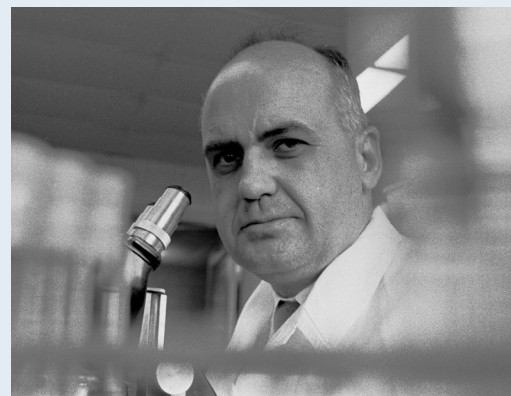
- **In-class assignments.** Some teachers have used the essay contest as an in-class project where students are able to earn a grade for their work. Others have worked in teaching teams to maximize the value of creating an essay across subjects. For example, teachers working in science, language arts, and social studies have assigned the contest for credit in one or more classes to help students make connections between subjects and strengthen their understanding and skills in each. Some have also used the contest as an assignment on days when a substitute teacher will be overseeing the class.
- **Independent or extra credit assignments.** The essay contest has been used as an independent or extra credit assignment to encourage students in a no-risk exercise to polish their writing skills. Some teachers have offered the contest as an extra test grade, allowing students to improve their average. The contest has also been used as an assignment for students in home-schooling environments.

- **Clubs.** The contest can also work as an activity for students in clubs or out-of-school programs, such as writing, science, or social studies clubs; Scouts; or after-school programs. The prompt can also be used to begin discussions about a larger idea. Following which, some students may opt to draft formal entries after engaging in those discussions.
- **Language learning.** The Maurice R. Hilleman Essay Contest allows Canadian students to submit their essays in English or French. As such, some teachers have used the contest as a way for their students to practice writing in French.
- **Local competition.** Although we have not heard of this being done (yet) and Hilleman essay contest winners are selected by the contest judging panel, you can consider holding an independent classroom or school-wide competition. Class-based or school-wide winners can be determined by other students, teachers, administrators, or local judges. The Hilleman essay contest prompt can be used, particularly if you can connect it to current learning objectives, or you can create a prompt that aligns with local concerns or learning goals. While locally designed contests and prompts cannot be submitted to the Hilleman essay contest, classroom assignments that use the Hilleman prompt and rules can be submitted if students choose to do so. This can be a particularly instructive activity for students if you time the in-class assignment or classroom competition such that students can get constructive feedback and have an opportunity to improve their essays before submitting them to the Hilleman contest.

## An incredible legacy inspires an incredible opportunity

Although he was born in 1919, Dr. Hilleman's legacy of striving to positively impact the world is something that resonates with all ages. We hope some of the contest ideas from other educators sparked thoughts of how to make this contest work in your classroom. By encouraging your students to enter the contest, they can not only sharpen their skills, but they can also move toward their dreams for the future.

Look for the Maurice R. Hilleman Essay Contest to open each fall. The prompt is typically revealed in concert with the National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT) annual conference. Middle school and high school winners from the U.S. and Canada will receive cash prizes, participate in our celebratory event in the spring, and have the opportunity to meet with and talk to scientists and others who support the contest.



*Dr. Maurice Hilleman has not only inspired me, but also many people around the world. He is an exemplary figure that shows just how far a bit of determination can go.”*

— **Contest entrant**

## Essay contest resources

### For educators

- Find a document showing how the contest can be applied to Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and Common Core State Standards (CCSS).
- Read an article about using special projects, such as the essay contest, in the classroom: “Spotlight on: Special projects as teaching tools, an interview with Lily Crist.”
- Download the MRH Essay Contest marketing flyer to display in your classroom.
- Sign up for our newsletters to get contest updates.

*What I love seeing in the essays is students are clearly using the writing process as a way to explore their own connections to the natural world, to science, and to ways that we can build a better tomorrow.*

— **Contest partner educator**

### For students

- See winning essays from past years.
- Explore helpful tips for essay planning and composition and find a contest checklist.
- Watch the video, “Tip Talk,” with advice for contest entrants.
- Download the contest official rules.

*Taking part in this competition has been so rewarding, and I’ve learned so much about writing and public speaking.*

— **Essay contest winner**

## GET CONTEST INFORMATION

Bookmark the MRH Essay Contest landing page for easy access!

[hillemanfilm.com/contest](http://hillemanfilm.com/contest)

