Submission Hints from the judges:

General Hints:

- Pick your best work. Quality is what matters. Sometimes it is hard to read our own work critically. Get others to read your work and help you to select the best submissions.
- Submit each piece only once. Pick the best genre and submit it there. Do not “hedge your bets” by submitting a piece in different categories. Each piece can only receive one award.
- Think about branching out to categories beyond poetry and personal narrative. Challenge yourself.
- Work with your teacher to revise the piece. Things which were submitted for school assignments often need to be revised, especially critical essays (see below)
- Read the category descriptions supplied by Scholastic and pay attention to the length limits and features of the genre. More on this below.

Some category-specific hints:

Critical Essay

- Many of these needed serious revision. Do not submit something you wrote for school as is. Your audience is different. Think of your audience as an intelligent general reader. If you are submitting an essay based on a book (which we don’t necessarily recommend), remember that your reader may have never read the book and may never read the book. Make your essay say something to that reader.
- Do not berate your reader. Remarks like “you probably won’t have the courage to like this essay” only serve to alienate your reader, even the ones who really like your work. This is not useful.
- Essays that sound like school essays written for an assignment generally do not score very high.

Dramatic Script

- We look at this in terms of how it would look in performance. You need to think about this too.
- Scripts need to be properly formatted. Look this up.
- Stage directions should not be exposition. The audience will not see them.
- Please do not exceed the length limit.

Flash Fiction

- This should tell a story. It is still a fictional piece.
- Sensational is rarely better. Try for something with a subtle kick.

Humor

- Please submit your funny stuff here. Sometimes it gets submitted in other categories and does not do well.

Journalism
• There should be a presentation of facts here, based on direct or indirect research. Pure opinion pieces would do better as critical essays.

Personal Essay/Memoir
• We get some things here that belong in the humor category as well as some which are opinion essays. The best ones tend to at least incorporate a story if not base themselves on a story.
• Experiment with form—try an episodic piece, try using an object as the basis of the piece, play with chronology, etc. Look at the previous gold key winners in this category.

Poetry
• Unless you have a themed collection, submit each poem individually. You will do much better. If we get three poems in a collection and one is really good, the score will be brought down because we have to judge the submission as a group. That said, themed collections add value by being grouped together. If the poems don’t work together to support a common meaning, submit them separately.
• Please do not center poetry on the page unless you have a real purpose for doing so.
• The same goes for playing with fonts and scattering words all over the page. Fine if you have a reason, but it’s distracting and annoying if you don’t.
• If your poem is a spoken word poem, it helps to say so.

Science Fiction/Fantasy
• Make sure that supernatural, magical, futuristic, scientific, and technological themes are a key element of these narratives.
• Do not base these stories on TV or movie plots.

Short Story
• Not to be confused with flash fiction, science fiction and fantasy or humor. Check to be sure.
• Horror does not generally do well here unless there is real character development.

Writing Portfolio
• If you want to submit the works in the portfolio for judging in separate categories, this needs to be done separately. Each work has to be registered separately.

Some other little things:

We do not require that the forms be in before the deadline, but they should be in two weeks after the deadline at the latest.

We do accept cash, and in a pinch, an email from a teacher (school account) or from a parent can substitute for a signature. We realize this presents a special challenge for boarding school students.

If you are submitting forms for multiple pieces, it is fine (and actually better) to write one check to cover the whole group of submissions.
Please do not staple checks to the submission forms. It means we have to pry them off.

We welcome questions. When in doubt, ask.