

**NFWL-NRA 2010 Bill of Rights National Essay Contest**

**ESSAY TOPIC: Freedom and Civic Virtues**

During America's founding years, Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Adams envisioned a free nation filled with responsible and virtuous citizens. When he stepped out of the Constitutional Convention and was asked what they had produced, Ben Franklin simply replied, "A Republic, if you can keep it."

Since the 1980s, millions of students in your generation have read books about moral excellence and participated in character education programs. Millennials born in the '80s and '90s are emerging into their adult years and into active citizenship.

And so we ask you: Were Ben Franklin and Samuel Adams right? Are there civic virtues that should be binding in the lives of all Americans? Are there values in which all people with good reason and a working conscience are obligated to act in accordance with? Are there natural rights that rest on these moral qualities?

**GUIDELINES:** This year’s essay topic is Freedom and Civic Virtues. In a 400 to 600 word essay explain how the Millennial Generation can exemplify freedom and civic virtue in their everyday lives. Step by step . . .

What do you think? Focus on freedoms, the U.S. Constitution and especially the U.S. Bill of Rights. Should laws and public policies be determined by reference to moral principles? Should law makers determine, create and bestow rights on the people OR are Americans born with a set of natural rights that can not be governed? Should virtues be the measure and basis of legal order and the goal of legislation and policy? How do these issues apply to our freedom and everyday lives? Use concrete examples in current events or historical events to prove your point.

To help with brainstorming, you may want to consider this comprehensive list of “basic goods” (rights) by contemporary moral philosophers:

*Life and security; Pleasure, happiness, health, and the avoidance of pain; Knowledge, truth, and practical reasonableness; The experience and appreciation of aesthetic beauty and/or the natural world; Inner peace, self-integration, integrity, authenticity; Religion or faith; People and relationships- including a good marriage, family, friendship, and community; Work, excellence, and/or achievements and Fairness and justice.*

Choose 2 or 3 of these “basic goods” to help you form your view. Which of these “basic goods,” in your opinion, are worthwhile? Is there evidence of these “basic goods” in the U.S. Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights? Moving forward, how can they be used as the foundation in the lives of the Millennial Generation? How do these virtues apply in everyday life?

**IMPORTANT:** In addition to the basics of spelling, punctuation, and writing style judges will critique your essay for its (1) research, logic, and insight (be sure to cite your sources); (2) understanding of America’s founding documents, especially the Bill of Rights; (3) A clear thesis statement in the introduction, (4) stories and examples; and (5) inspiration regarding the debates about virtue, ethics and law as it relates to our everyday lives.

**FORMAT:** 400 to 600 words, double spaced, 12 point font, Times New Roman or Arial.

**OPTIONAL Research Help:** Examples you may want to consider include:

- Research the American Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution, especially the U.S. Bill of Rights, and the thinking that went into them regarding both freedom and civic virtues. Consider Virginia’s Bill of Rights, written mostly by George Mason with help from Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, which pioneered freedom of the press and advanced freedom and natural rights in unprecedented ways. Also consider Pennsylvania’s Bill of Rights, which initiated free speech and strengthened religious liberty — two innovations that spread to the other new States.
- The debate between positivists (those that believe civic virtues can and should be governed) and natural-law advocates (those that believe in a set of innate natural rights that precede legal order). How are these points of view connected to the “basic goods” you have chosen to discuss?
- Has anarchy and absolute freedom, as advocated by Rousseau and Nietzsche, without civic virtue been proven disastrous? (ie. The French Revolution, Nazism, and dehumanizing “blood and soil” movements).
- America’ experiment in liberty in 1776 when the American Colonists declared themselves to be “endowed with inalienable rights” and offered their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to champion these inalienable rights.
- For virtue ethics and discussion of “basic goods”: Over the past four decades, a host of thinkers have picked up where Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and other great moral philosophers left off. These thinkers include Timothy (T.D.J.) Chappell, John Finnis, Philippa Foot, Alfonso Gomez-Lobo, Germain Grisez, Mark Murphy, Iris Murdoch, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Deidre McCloskey.