

Fighting Words: Writing Poetry in Response to Current Events

Thank you for being part of Fighting Words, the Pulitzer Center’s annual student poetry contest! This graphic organizer is designed to help you write a powerful poem that amplifies the global issues that matter most to you.

This graphic organizer will guide you through the following steps:

1. Reflect on a few essential questions that help us understand why this project matters
2. Analyze model poems, written by student contest winners from previous years
3. Select a focus issue and a Pulitzer Center news story you will respond to in your poem
4. Explore that news story and write down important lines from the story
5. Write an original poem that amplifies a global issue you care about, using lines from the Pulitzer Center news story you chose to explore
6. Reflect on and revise your poem (you can do this independently, or with a peer!)

Poems written following these directions can be entered into the [Fighting Words Poetry Contest](#) for the chance to win cash prizes and publication. You can submit your poem between March 4 and May 10, 2026 through the entry form on [this page](#). If you have questions or the form is not accessible to you, please email education@pulitzercenter.org.

Step 1: Reflect on These Essential Questions

1. What is a <i>global issue</i> ? Write the definition in your own words. (Here are some examples of global issues.)	
2. What is a global issue that affects you and your community? How is it impacting people?	
3. How can you make people aware of global issues that matter to you?	
4. What is the role of journalism in responding to global issues? What is the role of art and poetry?	
5. How are journalism and poetry similar? How are they different?	

Step 2: Analyze a Model Poem

1. Choose one of the following stories, and read it in full. When making your selection, please consider the topic and whether it feels safe for you to explore at this time; some stories contain difficult content.

- A. [“How Is Bangladesh Preparing Farmers for Increasingly Salty Soil?”](#) by Rachel Parsons
- B. [“Growing Up During Wartime”](#) by Natalie Keyssar
- C. [“How Extreme Heat Impacts Your Brain and Mental Health”](#) by Aryn Baker
- D. [“Silenced Crimes: Hate Speech and Hate Crimes Against LGBTI People in the Peruvian Amazon \(Spanish\)”](#) by Elizabeth Salazar and Marco Garro

2. Read the poem that responds to the story you chose. (The poem will have the same letter as the story!) Some poems also have audio recordings you can listen to. While you read/listen, underline any lines you hear that you recognize from the story you read.

- A. [“Let the Salt Speak”](#) by Perseas Kamalani Vanebo
- B. [“The Age We Never Chose”](#) by Kyle Pham
- C. [“Burned by My Own Pain”](#) by Briella Gauthier
- D. [“La Lupuna”](#) by Valeria Ruiz

3. Analyze the poem:

1. What lines jump out at you as important, interesting, and/or beautiful? Copy them here.	
2. What global issue(s) does this poem respond to?	
3. In what ways is the poem similar to the story you read? In what ways is it different?	
4. How does the speaker of the poem express personal connection to the subject matter?	
5. What poetic devices can you identify in the poem? (Metaphor? Repetition? Alliteration?) Choose one and explain how it contributes to the poem.	

More Model Poems:

1. Look through the Fighting Words poetry contest winners and finalists from [2025](#), [2024](#), [2023](#), [2022](#), [2021](#), [2020](#), [2019](#), and [2018](#). All of these poems were written by students in grades K-12. Choose two poems and read them in full, then skim the news stories the poets responded to.

2. Respond to the following questions, using evidence from the poems you chose to read:

First poem

1. What lines jump out at you as important, interesting, and/or beautiful? Copy them here.	
2. What global issue(s) does this poem respond to?	
3. What poetic devices can you identify in the poem? (Metaphor? Repetition? Alliteration?) Choose one and explain how it contributes to the poem.	

Second poem

1. What lines jump out at you as important, interesting, and/or beautiful? Copy them here.	
2. What global issue(s) does this poem respond to?	
3. What poetic devices can you identify in the poem? (Metaphor? Repetition? Alliteration?) Choose one and explain how it contributes to the poem.	

Step 3: Choose a Focus Issue and a Story for Your Poem

Now it's your turn to choose a global issue that matters to you! Stories on the Pulitzer Center website are organized into five big issue categories: *Global Health, Climate and Environment, Human Rights, Information and Artificial Intelligence, and Peace and Conflict.*

1. Consider: What issues impact you and your community? What issues do you find interesting and want to learn more about? What issues do you want other people to pay attention to and take action on?

2. Visit www.pulitzercenter.org/poetrycontest and click on the Suggested Stories tab. Choose an issue that interests you, and take some time to explore the headlines and first few paragraphs of several different stories. You may want to explore a few different issues before you decide on a story.

Note: These issues overlap! For example, you might find a story about environmental racism under Climate and Environment, Human Rights, *and* Global Health.

3. Choose a news story that moves you. (That means a story that you care about. It's much easier to make others care about an issue if you feel strongly about it yourself!) **You will be writing your poem in response to this story.**

Step 4: Explore Your Chosen News Story

1. Once you have chosen a story, use the graphic organizer below to record the story's headline, the journalist's name, and the global issue most central to the story (and your poem).

2. Read, watch, and/or listen to the story you chose. While you read/watch/listen, write down lines that jump out at you as important, interesting, or beautiful. You can write down both full sentences *and* short phrases. Try to identify phrases that...

- share important information about the issue
- capture the feeling of the story
- paint a powerful image

Tip: It will probably help to read/watch/listen to the story more than once!

Title of the Pulitzer Center news story you chose:

Name(s) of the journalist(s) who reported the story:

Global issue your story focuses on (Global Health, Climate and Environment, Human Rights, Information and Artificial Intelligence, or Peace and Conflict):

Lines from the Pulitzer Center story:

1. Write down words and phrases that stand out to you as interesting, emotional, or beautiful while you explore the story.
2. After you have finished exploring, go through your word / phrase bank and highlight or underline the words and phrases that you like best.

Step 5: Write Your Fighting Words Poem

Title of your poem:

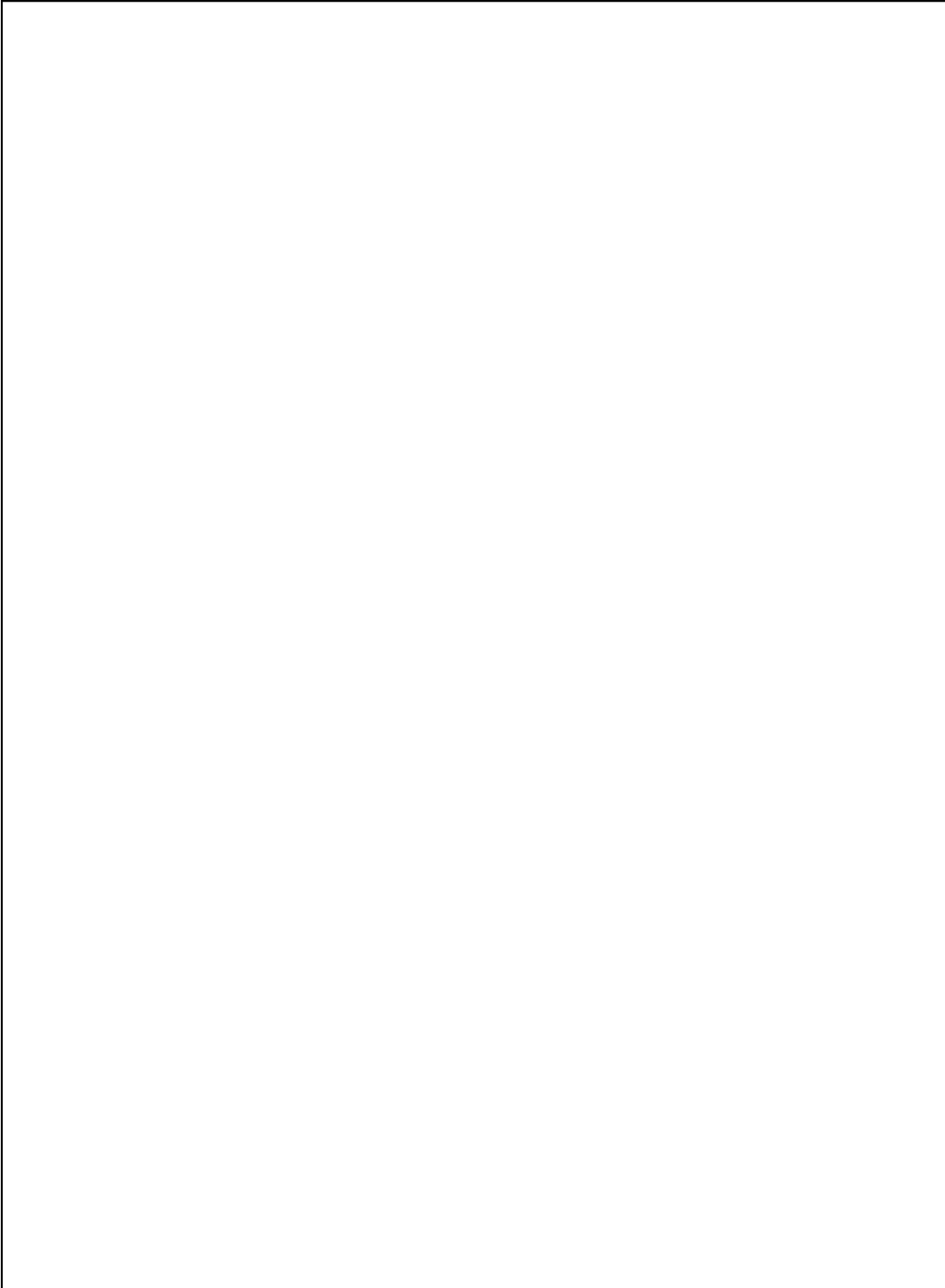
Epigraph:

Use this format: *With lines from “STORY TITLE” by JOURNALIST’S NAME, a Pulitzer Center reporting project*

Poem:

Remember: your poem should...

1. Be a response to a global issue that matters to you—the same global issue at the heart of the story you chose.
2. Include *at least* one line from the Pulitzer Center news story cited in your epigraph.



Step 6: Revise Your Poem

All poems get better with revision! Ask yourself these questions while you re-read your poem, and identify areas you may want to work on more. When you have reflected on the question, check it off.

1. How successful is my poem on its own terms? (Am I communicating what I want to communicate?)

Questions to ask yourself:

- What do I want my reader to understand about this issue and the themes of my poem? Does my poem successfully communicate my message?
- What feeling(s) do I want to evoke in my reader? Have I chosen words that evoke this feeling?
- Have I used poetic devices (e.g. repetition, imagery, metaphor), or chosen not to use them, to achieve a specific effect?

2. Have I successfully included lines from a Pulitzer Center news story?

Questions to ask yourself:

- Have I chosen lines that add something important to the poem?
- Are the lines integrated into the poem smoothly, so their presence feels natural?

3. Did I select my story and perspective thoughtfully, and have I treated the story and people involved in it respectfully in my poem?

Questions to ask yourself:

- What is my relationship to the story and the global issue I have chosen? How can I make a personal connection?
- Why am I writing from the perspective I have chosen? What other perspectives could I choose, and how would those choices change the poem?
- If the subjects of the story I have chosen read my poem, how might they feel? Am I honoring their voices, stories, and agency? If someone wrote a poem like this about me, my story, or my community, how would I feel?