

Frequently Asked Questions

Oakland Youth Poet Laureate FAQs

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General

▼ **What does the Oakland Youth Poet Laureate do?**

The Laureate represents Oakland and its youth at public and private events and is a model for other youth. They also share their experiences with the press and through blogs, videos, and social media.

The Laureate will have the opportunity to develop their own poet-leader project.

Everyone who applies will be invited to enter into a community of young poets and youth advocates.

▼ **What does it mean to be a Finalist?**

Finalists are all the applicants who advance to the final round of judging. Finalists have opportunities to meet experienced writers and perform at public events throughout the year and beyond.

Each Finalist, including the Laureate, will receive a \$500 prize after participating in the announcement event in June.

✓ **What happens if I apply but don't make it to the final round?**

Everyone who applies will be invited to enter into a community of young poets and youth advocates.

✓ **When are Finalists told they are Finalists?**

Finalists will be notified in early March. At that time, they are asked to provide a letter of support from an adult sponsor.

On April 18, 2026, all Finalists will participate in a mandatory in-person judging round where they are judged on Performance and Leadership.

✓ **When will the Oakland Youth Poet Laureate be announced?**

We will announce the new Oakland Youth Poet Laureate and Vice Youth Poet Laureate in June at an event where all Finalists perform.

✓ **Is there an award for the Oakland Youth Poet Laureate?**

After completing the program year, The Laureate will receive an educational scholarship of \$5,000, managed by Scholarship America.

Each Finalist, including the Laureate, will receive a \$500 prize at the beginning of the program year.

✓ **If I win, how will I receive the \$5,000 award?**

Scholarship funds will be sent directly to the school or arts program of your choice.

You must complete your full year as Poet Laureate to receive your award.

The scholarship is managed through Scholarship America which also offers financial, cultural, and social support.

▼ **What support would I receive as the Oakland Youth Poet Laureate?**

Oakland's Youth Poet Laureate will be in the spotlight, and will receive support from Oakland Public Library staff in developing public speaking skills and in the role of city representative. We'll be right there with you along the way!

We will also connect you to other youth and writing organizations for opportunities and support.

Scholarship America also offers financial, cultural, and social support.

▼ **What happens if the Poet Laureate doesn't complete the full program year?**

The Vice Laureate will step into the Laureate role if the Laureate is unable to complete the year.

Application

▼ **Am I eligible to apply?**

You are eligible to apply if:

- you live in Oakland
- you are between the ages of 13 and 18 on the day the application is due
- you will be available to serve as Laureate for the program year, which means that you will live locally the whole year and won't be enrolled in college full-time during the whole year (June - June)

✓ **When can I apply?**

Applications for the 2026 Oakland Youth Poet Laureate will be open from January 2 to February 1, 2026.

✓ **Where can I find the application?**

Once the application is live and we are accepting submissions, you'll find it linked on all the OYPL pages on the website.

You can download the paper application as a PDF [here now](#).

✓ **What needs to be included in my application?**

Your application needs to include:

- three original poems
- name and contact information for an adult sponsor
- an artist statement
- optional: list of any awards, community service, or activism including previous participation in the OYPL program
- name and contact information for your guardian/parent, unless you are 18 by the date the application is due

✓ **How do I submit my three poems?**

Your three poems need to be submitted in a single PDF that is not longer than 10 pages and that doesn't have your name on it. You will upload that PDF directly onto your online application.

✓ **What should be in my artist statement?**

In your artist statement, you get to introduce yourself in 250 words or less. Tell us who you are and what poetry means to you.

If you advance to the final round, this information will be used to build your bio.

✓ **What does the adult sponsor need to do?**

If you advance to the final round, you will ask your adult sponsor to write you a letter of recommendation. You should choose someone who knows your writing, school performance, or community involvement

Ask someone for this way in advance! If you make it to the final round, your letter of recommendation will be due in March.

✓ **I am a teacher or youth worker; can I nominate someone?**

Yes! You can submit the application on behalf of a young person as long as you can provide complete information for the nominee(s), including 3 poems, name of an Adult Sponsor and accurate contact information.

You may nominate up to 3 students.

Please confirm their ability to complete the program year (June - June) should they advance to the final round.

✓ **Can a senior in high school apply?**

You can apply if you are senior in high school and meet the age requirements as long as you will be living locally and not attending college full-time for the year after you graduate.

✓ **Can I apply if I live in San Leandro, Piedmont, or Berkeley?**

You may only apply if you currently live in Oakland (though you can attend school in other towns).

You may be eligible to apply for the Alameda County Youth Poet Laureate program or the Berkeley Youth Poet Laureate program.

While we aren't able to expand the contest to other cities right now, we welcome interested agencies from other cities to contact us with questions.

⌄ **What does “family member eligibility” include, and does this apply to me?**

To be fair, we cannot consider applications from family members of current judges, funders, and program sponsors who have significant influence over the contest criteria or outcome. If someone in your family is actively working on this year's contest, you are not eligible.

This “conflict of interest” policy applies only to those partners who are “coordinating, influencing or judging” the year of competition that you would be applying for.

If you are unsure if this applies to you, reach out and we'll be glad to talk to you about it.

Judging

⌄ **How does the judging work?**

There are two rounds of judging.

The first round is scored anonymously. The judges read the three poems you submit with your application and score them based on the *Content, Craft, and Voice*.

The poets who score the highest in the first round will move on to the second and final round of judging and be considered the year's OYPL Finalists.

In the final round, the judges score these Finalists on *Performance* and *Leadership*, based on the letter of support, the artist statement, any awards and community service, and previous involvement in the OYPL program, as well as a mandatory in-person reading and interview with the panel of judges in April.

The Oakland Youth Poet Laureate will be the one poet who scores the highest total of both rounds. The Vice Laureate will have the second highest score.

✓ **Who are the judges?**

There are five judges, representing a diverse group of experts from literacy, arts and educational organizations as well as local celebrity authors, artists and activists.

Past judges have included:

- U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera
- poets and playwrights Chinaka Hodge and Aimee Suzara
- community organizer and Poetry for the People alum Maria Poblet
- NAACP image award nominee Arisa White
- KQED Columnist Pendarvis Harshaw
- award-winning writer MK Chavez
- former Oakland City Councilmember Wilson Riles
- Hip Hop for Change Founder and Executive Director Kahfre Jay
- author, musician, educator, and community organizer Tyson Amir
- pianist, emcee, producer, music historian, and teacher Kev Choice
- poet, editor, and educator Maw Shein Win
- founder and executive director of Nomadic Press, J.K. Fowler
- former Oakland Youth Poets Laureate and Finalists
- Alameda County Youth Poet Laureate
- many other local authors and community leaders

You can get to know our most recent panel of judges.

✓ **What are the exact criteria the judges use?**

You can download a PDF of the criteria here: [Oakland Youth Poet Laureate Judging Criteria](#)

This is the exact criteria that will be used by the judges.

✓ **When do we find out who won?**

The Oakland Youth Poet Laureate and Oakland Vice Youth Poet Laureate will be announced in June at a public event with all the Finalists.

✓ **How will my three poems be judged?**

Your poems will be judged on content, craft, and voice. The first round of judging is anonymous, so you'll submit your poems without your name on them.

✓ **Can I be an OYPL judge?**

Each year we have a panel of five judges representing a diverse group of experts from literacy, arts, and educational organizations as well as local celebrity authors, artists, and activists.

If you are interested in being a future judge, have a relationship to Oakland, believe strongly in youth voices, and like to read and listen to poetry, please fill out our Judging Interest Form and tell us more!

Help & Technical Questions

✓ **How can I apply if I don't have internet access?**

You can visit your local library or school and use the internet there to submit your online application.

If you have no other means to submit your application online, a paper application is available for you to download and mail in.

OYPL 2026 Application Paper Version

Contact us to send you one by snail mail:

510-205-2738

or

OYPL

Teen Services, Oakland Public Library

125 14th St.

Oakland CA 94612

⌄ **Do I have to have a Google account to fill out the application?**

Yes, you do. You cannot complete the application without a Google account.

You can get one here: <https://accounts.google.com/SignUp>.

In the application, please give us the email address you check most often; you do **not** have to use your Gmail address for your contact email.

⌄ **Do I have to finish my entire application in one sitting?**

You must complete all the required questions at one time and submit. There is no way to save your work.

But after you submit, you will be sent a link enabling you to edit your application until the deadline. You will have to email us a new PDF of your poems, though.

We recommend that you look at the questions on the application and then prepare and proofread your responses over time in a savable document. Then you can copy and paste your perfect responses into the online application and have your poems ready for uploading in PDF form.

⌄ **How do I go back to change something in my application?**

Changes may be made to your entry before the deadline by using the “Edit Response” link in your confirmation email.

The pdf file of your poems *cannot* be changed.

If you would like to apply with a different pdf document, before the deadline you can forward your confirmation email to oypl@oaklandlibrary.org with the document attached and explain that you would like to replace your poems.

✓ **I have more questions. Who can I contact?**

Email oypl@oaklandlibrary.org or call the Oakland Public Library at (510) 205-2738.

