

QUEENS' COLLEGE ESTELLE PRIZE FOR ENGLISH
Competition Guidelines and Questions – 2026

Queens' College invites submissions for the Estelle English Prize 2026, which will be awarded to the best essay submitted by a Year 12 (Lower Sixth Form) student. Entries should answer one of the attached three questions, should be no longer than 2,500 words (including footnotes, references, illustration captions, and any other text), and should reach the College's Tutorial Office no later than Friday 3 July 2026. **The main focus should not be on something that has been or is currently being studied in the classroom or offered as A-level coursework.** The winner will receive a £500 prize (or, in the case of joint winners, each will receive a prize of £250); depending on the strength of the field of submissions, honourable mentions may also be made.

Each entry should be accompanied by a completed cover sheet, and submitted no later than 5 p.m. on Friday 3 July 2026 to the Tutorial Secretary, Tutorial Office, Queens' College, Cambridge CB3 9ET; essays and cover sheets may instead be scanned and submitted (as a single PDF file) by email to tutorial.secretary@queens.cam.ac.uk. **Entries received after 5 p.m. on 3 July 2026 will not be considered. Entries that are over the prescribed maximum length will not be considered. Entries submitted without a cover sheet will not be considered.**

Please note that entries will not be returned and entrants may therefore wish to keep their own copy of the submitted essay.

Receipt of entries will be confirmed by email. The winner and any honourable mention(s) will be notified by letter in July 2026.

The College does not enter into correspondence about any aspect of the competition or the results thereof. Feedback on the essays submitted is not provided.

Prescribed essay topics for the 2026 competition (*please choose one*)

1. Write about power and time in two or more of the following poems.

(a) William Shakespeare, Sonnet 29

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

(b) Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ozymandias'

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

(c) John Keats, 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

(d) Wallace Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

(e) William Carlos Williams, "The Hard Listener"

The powerless emperor
makes himself dull
writing poems in a garden
while his armies
kill and burn. But we,
in poverty lacking love,
keep some relation
to the truth of man's
infelicity: say
the late flowers, unspoiled
by insects and waiting
only for the cold.

2.

"My personal poetry is a failure.
I do not want to be a person.

I want to be unbearable.
Lover to lover, the greenness of love.
Cool, cooling."

Anne Carson, 'Stanzas, Sexes, Seductions'

Write about failure and/or the 'unbearable' in any 'personal poetry' that interests you.

3. In the following poem, the American poet John Ashbery suggests, 'Suppose this poem were about you'. In the light of Ashbery's poem, consider the ways in which literary writing can interrogate or unsettle its reader. Feel free to write in detail about any poetry or prose that interests you.

The Problem of Anxiety

Fifty years have passed
since I started living in those dark towns
I was telling you about.
Well, not much has changed. I still can't figure out
how to get from the post office to the swings in the park.
Apple trees blossom in the cold, not from conviction,
and my hair is the color of dandelion fluff.

Suppose this poem were about you – would *you*
put in the things I've carefully left out:
descriptions of pain, and sex, and how shiftily
people behave toward each other? Naw, that's
all in some book it seems. For you
I've saved the description of chicken sandwiches,
and the glass eye that stares at me in amazement
from the bronze mantel, and will never be appeased.