

Study Guide for the American Foreign Service Association's
2025-2026 National High School Essay Contest



***The Fragile Front Line:
U.S. Diplomacy and the Future of Soft Power***

Contest Deadline: March 1, 2026

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About the American Foreign Service Association

The American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) was established in 1924 and is the professional association for the U.S. Foreign Service. AFSA exists to support the Foreign Service as an institution and as a community of individuals deployed worldwide to protect and service America's people, interests, and values.

Nearly 80 percent of active-duty members of the Foreign Service choose to join AFSA—in addition to a large population of alumni/retired members—from the U.S. Department of State, the Foreign Commercial Service, the Foreign Agriculture Service, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and U.S. Agency for Global Media.

AFSA's primary functions include: diplomacy [outreach and education](#) (through initiatives such as the National High School Essay Contest), [collective bargaining/labor management](#), publication of [The Foreign Service Journal](#), and other activities to champion the work of U.S. diplomats at home and abroad.

About the National High School Essay Contest



Established in 1999, AFSA's National High School Essay Contest seeks to inspire the next generation of leaders to engage with the principles and practice of diplomacy.

Through thoughtful research and writing, students are invited to explore the history, challenges, and impacts of U.S. diplomacy and the work of the Foreign Service. This contest encourages young people to think critically about how U.S. diplomats utilize policy expertise, negotiation skills, and cross-cultural understanding to shape a more peaceful and interconnected world.

Participants have the opportunity to:

- Strengthen research and writing skills.
- Compete for scholarships, a cash prize, and national recognition.
- Network with leaders and students with a shared interest in international affairs.
- Add a standout achievement to college applications.

2026 Prizes:

First Place

1. Educational Voyage with [Semester at Sea](#)
2. Washington, DC visit for student and one family member to meet with State Department and AFSA leaders
3. Cash prize of \$2,500

Second Place

1. Scholarship to attend the [National Student Leadership Conference's International Diplomacy Program](#)
2. Cash prize of \$1,250

Honorable Mentions

1. Certificate of achievement

Rules & Guidelines

Please be sure to follow instructions closely. Any submissions that do not adhere to our guidelines will be automatically disqualified.

Eligibility

This contest is open to high school students in grades 9-12 who meet the following criteria:

- You must be attending school in any of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, or be a U.S. citizen/lawful permanent resident attending high school overseas.
- You may attend a public, private, or parochial school. Home-schooled students are also welcome to participate.
- Previous first-place winners and immediate family members of AFSA, Semester at Sea, and National Student Leadership Conference directors or staff are *not* eligible. However, if you've received an honorable mention or been a runner-up in the past, you are still eligible to enter.

- **Only students whose parents are not currently or have never been in the Foreign Service are eligible to submit.**

Word Count

- Your essay must be between 1,000 and 1,500 words. This word count does not include your list of sources.
- Essays that do not meet the required word count will not be considered.
- **When submitting your essay, be sure to include the word count on your submission, underneath the title.**

Deadline: March 1, 2026, at 11:59 p.m. EDT. Any submissions we receive after this time will be automatically disqualified. There are no exceptions to this rule; *please don't ask*.

Content and Style Guidelines

- Entries must be typed, double-spaced, in 12-point font with a one-inch margin on all sides of the page.
- Your essay should follow the content and style rules from the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and should include a bibliography. Criteria include:
 1. Proper citation of sources.
 2. Correct formatting for your list of works cited.
 3. Following MLA rules for margins and indentation.
- Your essay should draw from a variety of sources such as academic journals, news magazines, newspapers, books, government documents, and publications from research organizations. **Make sure at least three of your sources are primary—**documents, speeches, or materials created during the time you're studying.
- General encyclopedias (like Wikipedia) are not acceptable sources. If you use them, your essay will be disqualified.
- Websites shouldn't be your only source. If you do use online sources, make sure they're properly cited.

Responsible Use of Artificial Intelligence

- AFSA understands that generative AI is playing an ever-greater role in our society. However, we want this submission to be your own work. **While it is acceptable to ask AI questions related to your topic, please do not submit work that is not your own.**
- AFSA will screen the top 25 essays using AI-detection software. Any essays found to have excessive amounts of AI-generated content will be disqualified.

Finalist Interviews

- AFSA will conduct short (5-10 minute) online video interviews with the top five student essayists.
- During this interview, we will ask you specific questions about your essay, including your thesis and conclusions.

How to Submit Your Essay

- Complete the online registration form and upload your essay. All fields are required, including uploading a Microsoft Word or PDF file of your original work with a title and your essay word count. You must also include a comprehensive list of sources.
- Submissions must have a teacher or sponsor name. That person may review the submitted essay and act as the key contact between participants and AFSA. It is to the student's advantage to have a coordinator review the essay to make sure it is complete, contains all the necessary forms, is free from typographical and grammatical errors, and addresses the topic. By agreeing to sponsor your submission, the individual also vouches for the originality and integrity of your work.
- **Do not place your last name or your school's name on any of the pages of the essay.** Only the registration form should include this information. We will disqualify essays that include such identifying information.
- **Do** include the word count of your essay as part of the submission.

Judging & Criteria

- Your essay will be evaluated based on the depth of analysis, quality of research, and the clarity of writing, including style and mechanics.
- To be successful, your essay must fully address every part of the prompt and show a strong understanding of the role of the U.S. Foreign Service, as per the prompt.
- All qualifying essays will go through several rounds of blind judging, meaning the judges won't know the identity of the writers.
- The top five finalists will go through virtual interviews when each candidate will be judged on their knowledge of the subject matter.
- AI-detection software will be used to screen the top 25 essays.
- Judges' decisions are final.

Please note that once submitted, your essay becomes the property of the American Foreign Service Association.

PRIVACY POLICY: AFSA collects your information for this contest and for AFSA partners. You may be signed up to receive updates or information from AFSA and our partners. You may receive a message from our sponsor regarding their program offerings with the option to opt-out. Winner, runner-up, and honorable mentions will be notified in June 2026. Names of the winner, runner-up, and honorable mentions may also be shared across our communications and social media channels.



2023 Essay Contest Winner Justin Ahn and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

2025-2026 Essay Prompt

Over the course of its 250-year history, the United States has projected leadership abroad through a mix of hard and soft power. At the center of this effort has been the U.S. Foreign Service, the nation's professional diplomatic corps, which carries out U.S. foreign policy and advances American interests overseas. From negotiating peace agreements and managing crises to fostering long-term alliances, the Foreign Service is the front-line institution of American diplomacy.

Soft power is how a country attracts and persuades others without force. It includes culture (music, films, books), educational and professional exchanges, independent, fact-based news, and development and disaster aid. These tools help the United States build trust and lasting relationships.



Foreign Service members and supporters rally near former USAID headquarters in May 2025.

In 2025, those tools took a significant hit. The U.S. Agency for International Development was dismantled; the U.S. Agency for Global Media (home to Voice of America) was effectively closed; most exchange programs, including Fulbright, were suspended; and the Foreign Service itself was cut by about 25 percent. How can the United States build and sustain relationships without these efforts?

In 1,000 to 1,500 words, make a case for one of two positions: either explain how the United States can maintain global leadership without these tools, or argue that it cannot—and why.

In either direction, focus on the role of the U.S. Foreign Service with fewer people and fewer tools. If you believe leadership can be sustained, lay out clear, realistic steps diplomats could take to achieve their goals. If you believe it cannot, show where capacity would fall short, which risks would rise, and what costs would follow.

Background: History of the U.S. Foreign Service

The Foreign Service Workforce as a Part of U.S. Government

The U.S. State Department was founded in 1789 and has since undergone several reorganizations to address evolving diplomatic challenges.

More than 230 years later, the State Department and the entire U.S. Foreign Service continues to evolve and adapt to changing global landscapes. Below is a brief timeline of significant events in the history of the State Department:

Foundations of Foreign Affairs and America's Expansionist Years (1775-1867):

1. 1781: Department of Foreign Affairs begins under the Articles of Confederation.
2. 1789: James Madison proposes a Department of Foreign Affairs, later renamed the Department of State in 1789.
3. 1803-1823: Plays a role in westward expansion.
4. 1833-1836: Reorganized with the introduction of bureaus.
5. 1853: Authorizes the position of Assistant Secretary of State.
6. 1860: Overseas missions increase to 33.

Rise to World Power (1867-1913):

1. 1872: Consular Service problems lead to an investigation that found corruption and fraud.
2. 1893: U.S. upgraded its envoys, who were known as “ministers” to the rank of “ambassador.”
3. 1898: Spanish-American War elevates the U.S. to a global power.
4. 1905: President Roosevelt introduces competitive exams and merit promotions for all diplomatic and consular positions.
5. 1909: The Department was reorganized to address policy changes and increase in U.S. international commitments. The bureau system was expanded to organize diplomacy by distinct geographic regions—Western Europe, the Near East, the Far East, and Latin America.

Challenge of Global Conflict and Institutional Reform (1913-1945):

1. 1917: U.S. enters World War I. The fundamental shift in foreign policy led to the growth of the foreign services and an increase in public attention and praise.
2. 1924: Rogers Act reforms the foreign services by establishing a career organization based on competitive examination and merit promotion. Also, the Act unified the Diplomatic and Consular Services by creating a single organization performing both functions.

3. 1932-1934: The size of the Foreign Service was reduced by 10 percent due to the effects of the Great Depression
4. 1941-1945: When the U.S. entered WWII, the size of the Department grew at an unprecedented rate and by 1945 its staff had more than tripled (3,767 employees).
5. 1944: Department Order 1301 concentrated similar functions in the same office and related offices under a senior official, either the Under Secretary or one of six Assistant Secretaries and created several new entities.

The Cold War and the Collision of Superpowers (1945-1981):

1. 1946: Foreign Service Act of 1946 aims to strengthen and expand the Foreign Service.
2. 1950: State Department reviews U.S. strategic and military policy.
3. 1969-1971: President Johnson pushes for diversity in the Department.
4. 1976: President Carter's term emphasizes the foreign service and human rights.

End of the Cold War and New Global Problems (1981-1992):

1. 1981-1988: The State Department faced financial strains, with budget cuts under the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act exacerbating its worst modern budget crisis.
2. Reagan's administration prioritized Soviet and European diplomacy amid strained relations, led by Secretary Schultz.
3. Despite the Foreign Service Act, Reagan appointed both political and Foreign Service ambassadors, sparking controversy.
4. 1980s Challenges Abroad: U.S. embassies experienced violence and spying, with a significant death toll and attacks such as the 1983 Beirut embassy bombing. A \$1-billion program addressed security concerns globally.
5. 1989-1992: The State Department tackled new global challenges:
 - a. 1989: The U.S. condemned the Tiananmen Square crackdown in China.
 - b. The African Bureau fought apartheid in South Africa and contributed to ending the proxy war in Angola.
 - c. 1990-1991: The First Gulf War saw U.S.-led diplomacy and "Operation Desert Storm" expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait in a 100-hour land war.

American Diplomats and Types of Diplomacy

Diplomacy is a fundamental means by which a country's foreign policy is implemented. In the United States, diplomatic efforts are led by the U.S. Department of State, whose [mission](#) it is to "protect and promote U.S. security, prosperity, and democratic values and shape an international environment in which all Americans can thrive."

Diplomacy is put into practice by those working at embassies abroad, many of whom are Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) or Specialists, a professional career track. Members of the

Foreign Service at the U.S. Department of State are assigned to one of five “cones:” consular, economic, management, political, or public diplomacy. In the book [*Inside a U.S. Embassy: Diplomacy at Work*](#), AFSA provides snapshots of the important work each of these positions plays in embassies around the world:

1. **Consular Officers** serve as the public face of the United States in an embassy, determining which foreign nationals should — and should not — receive visas for legitimate travel to the United States for business, tourism or education. They also provide support to American citizens traveling or living abroad.
2. **Economic Officers** help anticipate economic trends and new opportunities for U.S. companies abroad. Their portfolio includes environment, science, technology, health and labor issues.
3. **Management Officers** enable embassies to function, handling human resources, budget and real estate issues.
4. **Political Officers** are subject matter experts who build relationships with local governments, media, nongovernmental organizations and think tanks. They report back on events happening in the country and provide analysis of how developments might impact U.S. policy objectives.
5. **Public Diplomacy Officers** serve as the public relations team, delivering the story of the United States to people around the world. They must have awareness of all aspects of the embassy’s work and be prepared to advise on the best way to message it to local media, officials, educators, and people.

U.S. Foreign Service professionals have tools and strategies to pursue U.S. policy objectives. The National Museum of American Diplomacy (NMAD) at the U.S. Department defines some of these concepts in their [Diplomatic Dictionary](#):

1. **Bilateral** diplomacy: discussions, negotiations or treaties are between a sovereign state and one other entity, either another sovereign state or an international organization. The relationship between two nations is referred to as a bilateral relationship.
2. **Multilateral** diplomacy: Involving more than two nations. International organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe are multilateral in nature.
3. **Negotiation**: Discussion between the representatives of two or more parties intended to reach a compromise on a disputed topic of interest. Governmental negotiations can be bilateral (between two states or between a state and a non-state entity, such as an international organization or nongovernmental organization) or multilateral.

4. **Treaty:** An agreement or arrangement made by negotiation; a contract in writing between two or more political authorities, such as sovereign states, formally signed by authorized representatives and usually approved by the legislature of the state.
5. **Convention:** An assembly of persons who meet for a common purpose; especially a meeting of delegates for the purpose of formulating a written agreement on specific issues. The word also refers to the written agreement itself.

The NMAD's [Diplomatic Dictionary](#) also outlines the difference between formal and informal diplomacy, which play different roles in achieving America's diplomatic objectives:

1. **Formal diplomacy:** This is government-to-government diplomacy—also called Track I Diplomacy—that goes through formal, traditional channels of communication to communicate with foreign governments (written documents, meetings, summits, diplomatic visits, etc).

This type of diplomacy is conducted by diplomats of one nation with diplomats and other officials of another nation or international organization.

2. **Informal diplomacy:** Informal diplomacy includes Public Diplomacy, which involves government-to-people diplomacy and reaching out to non-executive branch officials and the broader public, particularly “opinion-shapers,” in foreign countries, explaining both foreign policy and the national context out of which that policy arises.

Public Diplomacy is carried out by both diplomats and, under their programs and auspices, non-officials such as academic scholars, journalists, experts in various fields, members of non-governmental organizations, public figures such as state and local government officials, and social activists.

What do diplomats need in order to be successful? NMAD highlights the [nine skills](#) that diplomats must have to be effective in carrying out their duties. These skills have helped diplomats and FSOs throughout history carry out successful efforts to prevent conflict, build peace, and ensure prosperity:

Informational Skills are how a diplomat studies and begins to think about how to approach a situation or crisis.

1. **Analysis:** Study and think critically about situations.

2. **Awareness:** Respect different cultures and customs. Recognize when situations and circumstances are changing and adapt to meet that change. Be aware of what they do not know or understand.
3. **Communication:** Articulate their position and listen openly to others' positions. Determine where interests overlap. Confirm positions and use clear and appropriate language to avoid misunderstandings.

Relational Skills are how a diplomat works with their team and their counterparts.

4. **Leadership:** Take action and make decisions using what information is available. Keep the big picture in mind. Take steps to improve their country or organization's overall position and fill in knowledge gaps.
5. **Collaboration:** Incorporate the ideas of others and find common ground. Take cues from others when formulating responses and making proposals.
6. **Composure:** Work with others in a professional manner and calmly deal with the range of attitudes and behaviors exhibited by counterparts, difficult partners, and adversaries.

Operational Skills are how a diplomat executes a plan.

7. **Management:** Use the skills and strengths of their team members. Know what tools and resources are available to help meet their country or organization's goals and agenda.
8. **Innovation:** Formulate alternatives and be flexible in their responses to unanticipated circumstances.
9. **Advocacy:** Speak on behalf of the country or organization which they represent and pursue the goals and missions of that organization. Advocacy is also speaking up for and with others who may not have their voices heard.

U.S. Foreign Service Structure

Until recently, the U.S. Foreign Service was composed of six agencies:

-  **[The Department of State](#)** protects and promotes U.S. security, prosperity, and democratic values and shapes an international environment in which all Americans can thrive.
-  **[The United States Agency for International Development \(USAID, 1961-2025\)](#)** aimed to support economic growth, combat the spread of disease, promote democratic reform, address food insecurity, and assist countries recovering from natural disasters and conflict. (DISMANTLED in 2025)
-  **[The Foreign Agricultural Service \(FAS\)](#)** links U.S. agriculture to the world to enhance export opportunities and global food security.
-  **[The Foreign Commercial Service \(FCS\)](#)** is part of the U.S. Department of Commerce's International Trade Administration and serves American interests abroad by offering companies a full range of expertise in international trade.
-  **[The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service \(APHIS\)](#)** protects the health and value of America's agricultural and natural resources because healthy and profitable American agriculture provides food and clothing for countless people worldwide and is a key pillar of our economy.
-  **[The U.S. Agency for Global Media \(USAGM\)](#)** aims to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy. (EFFECTIVELY DISMANTLED in 2025)

Additional Resources

Here are some additional resources that might be helpful as you work on your essay.

Also, keep an eye on [AFSA's social media accounts](#) and [website](#) for the latest developments in the field of international affairs/U.S. diplomacy and current events impacting the workforce.

[Inside a U.S. Embassy: Diplomacy at Work](#). This bestselling AFSA publication shows you what it is like to work in an embassy through profiles of actual members of the Foreign Service and their experiences around the world.

[The Foreign Service Journal](#). AFSA's flagship publication covering foreign affairs from an insider's perspective, providing thought-provoking articles on international issues, the practice of diplomacy, and the U.S. Foreign Service.

[The National Museum of American Diplomacy](#). NMAD provides a variety of useful resources including online [exhibits](#) and [educational resources](#). Be sure to check out the museum's [historical diplomacy simulation program](#).

[The Office of the Historian](#). Website includes useful [educational resources](#) and reading material as well as a detailed [history of the State Department](#).

[The Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training](#). ADST has the world's largest collection of U.S. diplomatic oral histories, as well as podcasts, videos, books, publications, and a "Moments in U.S. Diplomatic History" online series.

[The American Academy of Diplomacy](#). AAD has a useful collection of materials to learn more about the practice of diplomacy, including various [publications](#) and [podcasts](#).

[Council on Foreign Relations](#). CFR's [Academics Program](#) offers a wide variety of resources to learn more about U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy. Their website offers reports, publications, and discussions on global affairs, as well as podcasts and webinars.

[The MLA Style Center](#). Per the essay contest rules, your citations and bibliography should follow the MLA Style. The Modern Language Association's website has a quick guide to works cited, guidance on using notes, and sample papers using MLA Style.

About Our Partners



Semester at Sea is a multiple country study abroad program open to students of all majors emphasizing comparative academic examination, hands-on field experiences, and meaningful engagement in the global community. A wide variety of coursework from 20-25 disciplines is integrated with relevant field studies in up to a dozen countries, allowing for a comparative study abroad experience that is truly global. Colorado State University is the program's academic partner. Learn more at www.semesteratsea.org.



The National Student Leadership Foundation—a 501(c)3 nonprofit, nonpartisan, education organization, the NSLC provides students with the opportunity to experience life on a college campus; develop essential leadership skills; and explore a future career through exciting simulations, exclusive site visits and interactive meetings with renowned leaders in their chosen field. Learn more at www.nslcleaders.org.