

The National Systems-Impacted Writers' Contest

Rhythms, Rituals, Regimens

Contest Open Period:
November 1st, 2025 — February 14th, 2026



Our Theme: *Rhythms, Rituals, Regimens*

Our lives are made of ritual: a daily medicine, taken with breakfast or at night; a rutted road; a morning coffee; thirty pushups; a hallway; a greeting; a splash of cold water to the face; a weekly game of chess, or basketball; a song heard over and over; an overheard sound from the life of a stranger; a prayer; a letter; a newspaper; a nickname; an evening wind; a daily angle of light.

Please write on the rhythms, rituals and regimens that fill your experience in the world. Feel free to consider, in your writing, the following questions: When do regimens hold us steady, and when do they hold us back? How does repetition change the meaning of what's being repeated? When does a habit *become* a ritual? You could also, instead of writing on your own personal rituals and rhythms, write on the rhythms and rituals you view in a practice or object or landscape outside yourself (music and sports, for example, are full of rhythms. So is the sky).

Note: Please know this description — and our theme in general — is meant as a point of origin, not in any way as a border. Feel free to interpret it very broadly.

Criteria

- 1) The contest is open genre — please send writing in any form, whether it be nonfiction, poetry, fiction, screenplay, etc., **at or below 1,000 words. (1 prose piece, or 1-5 poems.)**
- 2) The writing must be yours and original to you.
- 3) By "systems-impacted," we refer to persons who have been arrested or convicted of a crime; incarcerated in a juvenile-detention center, jail, prison, or other carceral institution; involved in the foster care system or placed in juvenile custody; or, finally, incarcerated in an immigration detention facility or other immigration related custody.
- 4) By submitting to the USC PEP Systems Impacted Writers' Contest you confirm that you are the sole owner of the Work and have the full power to grant the USC PEP the rights to publish the Work.

- 5) We will not consider submissions under review elsewhere (e.g., other contests and publications), or work that has been published anywhere else or in any other form, either in print or digitally.
- 6) Please note that if your submission is selected for a prize and publication, you grant the USC Prison Education Project a royalty-free license to use your submission in all formats and media published or distributed by the Prison Education Project or its partners and affiliates.

Visual Art Category!

In addition to written pieces, we will also be accepting submissions of visual art on the theme of *Rhythms, Rituals, Regimens*, to be included in our anthology. Please submit no more than 5 pages of visual work. All other contest criteria apply to visual art submissions.

PLEASE send, along with your writing, a 1-3 sentence biography!

(If you are chosen for the contest, this bio will be used in our printed anthology)

Winners will be notified by May 1st. Winners will receive...

- 1) A monetary prize: \$500 for three Winners, \$100 for seven Honorable Mention awardees.
- 2) Publication in our 2026 Annual Systems Impacted Writing Contest Chapbook (along with ten contributor copies of the book for contest Winners, and five copies for Honorable Mentions)

SUBMISSION

Please either submit pieces via email to pep@dornsife.usc.edu or mail them to us at:
2026 National Systems-Impacted Writers' Contest
USC Prison Education Project
950 W Jefferson Blvd., JEF 150
Los Angeles, CA 90089-1293

A note on payment: Our team is committed to paying every winning writer. Because each artist's situation is unique, please be aware that payment may take up to six months to receive. In-custody writers may be asked to select a proxy who is not in-custody to receive payment (e.g., a family member, a trusted friend, etc.). A note on returning submissions: It is our express desire to return every submitted piece of writing to its author by mail. While we are committed to doing everything in our power to send your writing back to you, we acknowledge that, occasionally, outside factors and complications make doing so impossible. We thank you for your understanding, and for entrusting us with your creative work.