



2026 SSTC STUDENT ESSAY CONTEST

ESSAY PROMPT:

For most of human history, people could not closely observe many astronomical objects and even if they could view nearer objects, the only method of sharing their observations would have been through sketches. This changed in the 1800s when observers first attached cameras to their telescopes and took images of the Moon. In the 1900s, it became possible to launch spacecraft and telescopes into space, which opened up the possibility to get closer to space objects. Thanks to the improvement in imaging instruments and image quality, it is now much easier for us to visualize and study the universe. Your task (described below) will encourage you to understand how space images have evolved and appreciate the technological advancements that make them possible.

First, select an astronomical object that has been imaged over a span of a few decades. This could be a planet (other than the Earth) or moon in our solar system or beyond. It could also be another formation like a galaxy or asteroid.

Next, pick at least three images, but not more than five images of this object taken from space. The oldest and most recent image should be taken at least 25 years apart. These images may be historical sketches, taken using telescopes (on Earth or space-based), cameras onboard satellites or flyby missions.

Compare the selected images and find any similarities between them. Also consider the differences in color, resolution and electromagnetic spectrum bands used. The instruments and cameras used have likely evolved through the years. Understand and discuss the technological improvements between your selected images.

Discuss the goals of taking images of this astronomical object through the years. Which scientific questions have the images help answer? Find one aspect about this object that is yet to be answered from the images taken so far.

REQUIREMENTS:

- Typewritten essay, double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 pt. font, in 1,000 words or less
- **Include your selected images within your essay document, in line with your text**
- **The use of Artificial Intelligence for text generation and improving language is strictly not allowed**
- Include student name, teacher name, grade, and school name in your submission

DEADLINE: Essay submission deadline to local AIAA section officers is May 1, 2026. Submission of local section winning essays to the national contest is May 15, 2026. National winners and their teachers will be notified by in June 2026.

JUDGING CRITERIA:

1. Originality of ideas presented (30%)
2. Soundness of logic used to develop ideas (30%)
3. Realism of ideas presented (20%)
4. Quality of composition & clarity of expression (20%)

NATIONAL PRIZES:

- 1st place will be awarded \$125,
- 2nd place will be awarded \$75, and
- 3rd place will be awarded \$50.

Winners are publicly announced in the Fall issue of Aerospace America magazine.

ELIGIBILITY:

Any seventh or eighth grader (or equivalent). Please contact your local section officers (<https://aiaa.org/get-involved/committees-groups/regions-sections/>) to confirm they will be accepting entries.

For local sections not participating, you may submit to “at-large” through Jeff Puschell, jjpuschell@gmail.com.

QUESTIONS: Email Smrithi and Oliver (smrithik@umich.edu , oliverjr@umich.edu)