

2026 Arkansas Press Association BETTER NEWSPAPER EDITORIAL CONTEST RULES & CATEGORIES

1. ELIGIBILITY: Contest open to employees of Arkansas Press Association member newspapers and media members in good standing. Entries must be submitted by the member newspaper, not by individuals. The current owner of any former APA member newspaper(s) that have ceased publication may submit qualifying entries for work complete during the contest eligibility time frame. Syndicated work of an employee may only be submitted from the newspaper of origin.

2. CONTEST PERIOD: All entries must have been published January 1 through December 31, 2025.

3. DEADLINE: Entries must be submitted by midnight on May 4, 2026.

4. ALL ENTRIES must be full-page pdf documents (including photo entries) and show date of publication. Please send story continuations. For entries that require more than one story, save as one pdf document in a low resolution format before uploading. To help judges locate the correct story or photo, the name of the entry (e.g. Fire Destroys Business) and the pdf file name should be the same. Entries must be submitted exactly as they were published.

5. LIMIT OF ENTRIES: There is a LIMIT of entries per newspaper in each category, but it varies, so read the rule for each category. Most news categories have a limit of four, and photo categories have a limit of five.

6. Cost to Enter: The contest fee per newspaper is \$25 plus \$7 per individual entry. Once all entries are submitted and finalized, click "Billing." This will take you to a page where the entry fees are automatically generated. You will have an option to pay your total cost by credit card or to be invoiced.

7. DIVISION PLACEMENT: Your newspaper has been pre-assigned a division based on your paid circulation.

(A) To be FAIR to smaller staffed, smaller circulation newspapers, multiple-ownership newspapers must submit entries in the division of their

Div. 1 Circulation under 1,200
Div. 2 Circulation 1,201 - 2,000
Div. 3 Circulation 2,001 - 7,000

Div. 4 Circulation over 7,000
Div. 5 Media members

largest circulation newspaper. An exception will only be made if the entries are sent with a written statement from the publisher saying that no help from personnel at the larger circulation newspaper(s) was used in publishing the smaller circulation newspaper.

(B) If work is published in more than one newspaper in a group, the person may enter from only one newspaper and must compete in the larger circulation division.

8. JUDGING:

(A) For a category to be judged there must be at least three entries from three different newspapers. Otherwise those entries will be added to and judged with the next highest division.

(B) Judges will be asked to make comments on winning entries. Comments will be given to the newspaper after the awards ceremony.

(C) Awards will be made in first, second, and third place. Honorable mentions may be awarded at the judges' discretion. Decisions of judges will be final.

9. GENERAL EXCELLENCE AWARD: Winners of the General Excellence Award will be determined by compiling points received for first, second, third place and honorable mention awards won in all categories. First place awards are worth ten points; second place, six points; third place, three points; and honorable mention, one point.

10. Announcement of winners will be made on June 27 during the 2026 APA Convention at the Inn of the Ozarks in Eureka Springs.

LOGIN, UPLOAD & SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1 – Acquire your login information from APA. Contact Terri Cobb at Terri@arkansaspress.org.

Step 2 – Login at www.newspapercontest.com/arkansas. You will see a page showing any entries you have already submitted. Complete rules for the contest are available on the website. Some browsers, such as Safari, will open the rules in a new window; others will require you to download the PDF file to your computer.

Step 3 – Click on the “Add New Entry” link.

Step 4 – On this page, select your newspaper name. A lot of information will autofill. If that information is incorrect, please contact APA. Your division will be selected for you based on your circulation. Fill in the preparer’s name. (The preparer is the person uploading the entry into the online contest platform, not the staffer who will be credited for any award.)

Step 5 – Select the Newspaper Group from the drop-down menu for the contest you are entering. You must select Open, All Daily, All Weekly or Contests By Division.

Step 6 – Select the contest category from the drop-down menu. When you select the category, special instructions will appear below it. If you don’t see the category you’re looking to enter, make sure you’ve selected the correct Newspaper Group (See Step 5). This field will clear each time you save an entry, so you must select a category for each new entry.

Step 7 – Enter the title/cutline for your entry. When uploading full-page PDF files, make sure the entry name matches the headline on the page so the judges can find it easily.

Step 8 – Include the name of the person or people who should be credited for any award. This is generally the writer, photographer, graphic artist, cartoonist, etc.

Step 9 – Add your file or files. You can drag and drop files or use the “Add files” button to navigate your files.

Step 10 – IMPORTANT: When you have completed your submission, click the “Save” button. If you click the “Back to list” button, you will lose the entry you just completed. After clicking “Save,” you will be directed back to the list of your entries.

Step 11 – To submit another entry, click “Add New Entry.” As long as you have not logged out of the system, your newspaper name will still be in place and you can simply start at Step 5 again. You may log out and log back in later to continue adding entries. You will need to select your newspaper name each time you log in.

Step 12 – If you are done submitting entries, please review the list. You may not change an entry, but you may delete an entry and resubmit it. When done uploading all your entries, click the “Billing” button on the list page. This will take you to a page where the entry fees are generated. You may click the PayPal Link to pay by credit card or mail your payment to: APA Contest, 411 S. Victory St. Little Rock AR 72201. Once payment is made, we will mark your newspaper paid and complete.

CATEGORIES

CATEGORY 1 — News Story

For each entry, submit full-page document showing a single staff-written news story. Spot news and sidebar stories may be submitted. Judging will be based on community wide importance of event, timeliness, thoroughness of reporting, writing style and effectiveness of lead. **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 2 — Feature Story

For each entry, submit full-page document showing a single staff-written feature story. Judges will consider writing style, originality and general interest. Portrait pieces may be included. **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 3 — Arkansas Freedom of Information Reporting

For each entry, submit full-page document showing all stories written with information gathered utilizing the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act. Each entry should include a cover letter explaining the need to use the FOIA, the focus, scope and method of the investigation, and the subsequent results and impact following publication of the stories. Save all documents into one pdf file. All winning entries will be forwarded to compete for the Meredith Oakley FOIA Award. The award includes a \$1,000 prize and plaque. **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 4 — Investigative Series Reporting

For each entry, submit full-page documents showing all stories in a series on one single event or subject or news item. Minimum three (3) stories to qualify as a series. Judging will include depth of reporting, organization of material, writing style and reader interest. All winning entries will be forwarded to compete for the IF Stone Award. The IF Stone Award includes a \$1,000 prize and plaque. **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 5 — Beat Reporter

For each entry, submit a minimum of three (3) articles from a single reporter covering a specific beat (courts, sports, outdoors, city council, etc.) **Limit one entry each from 3 reporters.**

CATEGORY 6 — Sports News Story

For each entry, submit full-page document. Judges will consider originality, style, writing and reader interest. (Enter sports features in Category 7.) **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 7 — Sports Feature Story

For each entry, submit full-page document. Judges will consider originality, style, writing and reader interest. (Enter sports news/game time stories in Category 6.) **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 8 — Business Story

Single story or series to include all aspects of agriculture, tourism and business, with special emphasis on coverage of local farming, tourism, business and industries in your community. **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 9 — Education Story

Single story or series to include all aspects of education, school boards and other school activities in your community. **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 10 — Health/Medical Story

Single story or series to include original local and state health and medical features and news. **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 11 — Freelancer Recognition

The intent of this category is to recognize Arkansas freelance writers and non-syndicated writers. If a story is published in more than one paper, it should be entered in the largest circulation paper. For each entry, submit full-page document. Judges will consider writing style, originality and general reader interest. **Limit 4 entries.**

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CATEGORY 12 — Sports Column

For each entry, submit full-page document. Columns on sports should be entered. Judging will include writing style, originality and reader impact. Columns must have bylines or standing headings and must be regularly published in your newspaper. **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 13 — Editorial

For each entry, submit a full-page document. Content must be original. Syndicated material is not eligible. Judging will be on local impact, reasoning, writing excellence and leadership shown by the editorial. An editorial represents the opinion of the newspaper. A column is NOT an editorial! **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 14 — News/Political Column

For each entry, submit full-page document. Only columns on news issues or politics should be entered. Judging will include writing style, originality and reader impact. Columns must have bylines or standing headings and must be regularly published in your newspaper. **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 15 — General Interest Column

For each entry, submit full-page document. Columns on general interest, people or “slice of life” should be entered. Judging will include writing style, originality and reader impact. Columns must have bylines or standing headings and must be regularly published in your newspaper. **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 16 — Humorous Column

For each entry, submit full-page document. Column should be humorous in nature. Judging will include writing style, originality and reader impact. Columns must have bylines or standing headings and must be regularly published in your newspaper. **Limit 4 entries.**

CATEGORY 17 — Ernie Deane-Brenda Blagg Columnist of the Year

For each entry, submit five (5) different columns written by one individual. Judges are looking at a body of work by one individual staff member. Save all columns marked on the pages into one pdf file titled with the columnist’s name. One entry per columnist, but newspapers may submit up to three (3) different columnists. Overall winner from all divisions will be awarded Columnist of the Year and receive a special plaque and \$1,000 from the Ernie Deane Endowment Fund.

PHOTOGRAPHY

For each entry, submit a full-page PDF. Computer created and composite photos may not be entered.
Photos may be black and white or color.

CATEGORY 18 — Single News Photograph

Name of photographer must be given. Judging will include timeliness, impact and technical quality. Clearly name the photo to be judged. **Limit 5 entries.**

CATEGORY 19 — Single Feature Photograph

No sports photos. See category 21. Name of photographer must be given. Portrait photo may be included in this category. Judges will consider photographic excellence, reader appeal and technical quality. Clearly name the photo to be judged. **Limit 5 entries.**

CATEGORY 20 — Single Sports Action Photograph

Name of photographer must be given on entry form. Clearly name the single ACTION photo to be judged. Judges will consider action, newsworthiness and quality. (Sports feature photos should be entered in Category 21.) **Limit 5 entries.**

CATEGORY 21 — Single Sports Feature Photograph

Name of photographer must be given on entry form. Clearly name the NON-ACTION sports photo to be judged. Judges will consider photographic excellence, reader appeal and technical quality. **Limit 5 entries.**

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CATEGORY 22 — Picture Page/Photo Essay

Each entry consists of one full-page document. This category is for one best picture page OR photo essay. It may be produced by one person or a team. Judges will consider photo quality, layout, art work, reproduction, originality and text material. **Limit 4 entries.**

PHOTO OF THE YEAR

All first-place photos from the photography categories 18-21 will be judged together to determine the Photo of the Year for Arkansas Press Association. Photo of the Year will receive a special plaque presented during the awards luncheon.

LAYOUT & DESIGN

CATEGORY 23 — Best Front Page

Submit three (3) FRONT pages from three different issues. Judges are looking at a body of work. Save all pages as one pdf document. Judges will consider general news content with special emphasis on local coverage, design, news play and typography with regard to appropriateness, quality, impact, legibility, organization and creativity. **Limit one (1) entry per newspaper.**

CATEGORY 24 — Graphic Design Portfolio

Submit three (3) full-page pdfs from a staff member showing effective use of design, graphics, artwork, charts, maps or other devices that provide, explain or clarify information from a news story or feature. Judges are looking at a body of work. Save all pages as one pdf document. Judging will be based on originality, craftsmanship and presentation of information only, not the accompanying story. **Limit 3 entries (3 staff members per newspaper).**

CATEGORY 25 — Headline Writing

For entry, submit full-page pdf document. Headlines over photos can be submitted. Judges will consider originality, creativity (graphic presentation), appropriateness (how well it relates to the story or photo), clever use of words, impact, attention-getting quality and humor. To help judges locate the entry, the headline and pdf document title should have the same name. **Limit 5 entries.**

CATEGORY 26 — Best Digital Presence & Audience Engagement

For entry, submit the link to your website along with any username and password needed to view content. Include as well links and usernames to your social media you would like judged (ie Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). Include podcast or YouTube channel links you want to include. The judges will randomly visit all your sites between May 24-31, 2026. Judging will be based on content (quality of news, timeliness and organization); visual/design (layout, photos, color) and activity from readership. **Limit 1 entry per newspaper.**

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CATEGORY 27 — Center for Integrity in News Reporting (CFINR) Award of Excellence — Arkansas

The Center for Integrity in News Reporting will provide \$5,000 to a reporter/reporters in Arkansas for the best example of impartial, objective and fair reporting in newspapers. One overall winner will be chosen for Arkansas. Enter in your newspaper's assigned division. First-place winners will be chosen for each division, and one overall winner out of the first-place winners will receive the \$5,000 prize.

Entries should consist of at least one reported news story, not a column or editorial. If part of a series, the full series by the same reporter or reporting team may be submitted as one entry.

Judges will use the following rubric, which focuses on verifiable facts, balanced perspectives, neutral tone/language, transparency and thoroughness of source, while excluding opinion and emotional appeals:

Accuracy and Fact-Checking

- All factual claims should be supported by evidence.
- Information has been verified through multiple independent and reliable sources.

Balance and Multiple Perspectives

- On controversial or complex issues, the report should present multiple viewpoints without favoring one over the other.
- The amount of attention given to different sides should be proportional to the weight of the issue.

Neutral Language and Tone

- The language used should be objective and informative, not sensationalized or emotionally charged.
- The report should avoid loaded adjectives, adverbs, or framing that tell the reader how to interpret the facts or feelings.

Sourcing and Transparency

- Reporters should clearly identify their sources, ideally with verifiable details (e.g., name, position, institution) rather than vague references like "leading doctors say."

Separation of News and Opinion

- The entry must be a straight news report and not an editorial, opinion piece, or column

Completeness and Context

- The entry should provide enough context and background information for the audience to understand the broader implications of the story.
- It should cover "the whole story," not just the parts of a story that support a particular narrative.

Limit 1 entry per newspaper.