



CONDITIONS OF YOUR EXISTENCE WRITING

CONTEST DEADLINE: MARCH 31, 2026

Open Call for Personal Essays for the “Conditions of Your Existence” Writing Contest

Eligibility:

All people currently incarcerated in Illinois are welcome to submit an essay. People with life sentences and who are serving more than 20 years are especially encouraged to submit.

Prizes:

First Prize will be awarded to 2 writers who will receive \$150 each.

Second Prize will be awarded to 2 writers who will receive \$100 each.

Honorable Mention will be awarded to 3 writers who will receive \$50 each.

Submissions:

How have your conditions of existence shaped you and your community? How have you survived or changed your conditions of existence? What motivates you, what breaks you, what sustains you? We invite essays reflecting on lessons you've learned about yourself, about survival, about the world.

Please, no rants! We want to amplify your personal stories.

Submissions should be no more than 2000 words or no more than 8 handwritten pages. We strongly recommend that applicants keep a copy of their writing. We are unable to return submissions to applicants. Please include your name, prison ID number and address, and a few sentences describing who you are.

DEADLINE for submissions: March 31, 2026

Send submissions to Build Communities Not Prisons c/o WTS, 2717 W. Madison St., Chicago, IL 60612

DECISIONS: Winners will be notified May 15, 2026

This contest is organized by Build Communities Not Prisons in partnership with the Beyond Prisons Initiative and with support from the Mud Theatre Project.