

# First Amendment Essay Contest

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The First Amendment is the foundation of everything we value as Americans; it ensures us the freedom to voice our opinions, worship our god of choice (and name stuffed animals after it), and protest what happens in the White House. Schools teach students at a young age that they as American citizens are born with these rights. However, the real lesson is learned when students actually put the First Amendment into practice and face censorship head-on.

My principal censored our school newspaper's first issue of this year. In my opinion column, I accused our school's beauty pageant of being bad for girls' self-esteems and questioned the educational merits of holding such a contest. After reading this plus our opinion editor's piece written in the satirical style of Jonathan Swift, which suggested that killing the bottom twenty-five percent of fifth graders could rid the world of a stupidity epidemic, our principal confiscated the remaining issues of the paper. He said, along with the content being inappropriate and our use of what he called profanity, our paper portrayed the school in a negative light. He said he wanted ours to be a "positive, uplifting publication". Our class was also told we were not allowed to print anything regarding Halloween for the upcoming issue.

His decision infuriated me. I felt that I had tastefully taken a position and defended it well in my column, and our editor's piece was humorous and appeared to an audience comprised of people who read "A Modest Proposal" in their literature classes. I decided to create an Internet group titled "Let Freedom Ring for Smoke Signals" and held a First Amendment rally downtown. Students, teachers, and even veterans spoke at the rally about the importance of protecting our freedom and held signs that spelled out the freedoms the First Amendment guaranteed. I was amazed at some of the reactions of people driving by; some gave blank starters, as if they weren't even sure what the First Amendment was.

Along with protesting online and in the streets of my hometown, I appealed to the Coweta County Board of Education to changing our county's student publications policy to recognize the First Amendment rights of students and the educational value of a student newspaper. They did not my request; they simply said they supported my principal's decision. Now I must make a decision on what my next battle stage will be – I cannot in good conscience give up and allow unfounded censorship to take place in our county.

Student newspapers have countless educational benefits. Students are allowed to publish their thoughts and receive feedback, good and bad. Moreover, a newspaper educates the student body, encourages reading for pleasure, and promotes free thinking- all goals of educators.

Now more than ever, it is important for student to defend their Amendment rights. If this censorship can occur at my school, it could occur anywhere. Some states have become anti-Hazelwood states; I believe it's entirely possible for Georgia to become one as well if student journalists are willing to demand they be granted their freedoms. The key to keeping freedoms is to fiercely protect them, and it is every American citizen's responsibility to do so.