

HOUSTONFEST: INSTRUCTIONS TO VIRTUAL JUDGES FOR 2027

First of all, **thank you** so much for giving your time to help with our contest! Without you, Houstonfest could not take place. I (Rustin Buck) as director and the teachers and students are very grateful to you for your time and effort.

Students placing in the top five in any event will advance to the Texas State German Contest on February 27 to compete against the winners of our sister contests, Sprachfest in the Austin/San Antonio area and Winterfest in the Dallas area. Some of you may also serve as judges for that contest (but as with the regional contests, the online judging for State will occur a week earlier, so February 20-23).

Procedures for Online Judging

For simplicity, **an entry consists of one PDF document** which will contain everything you need to judge the entry (except in Digital Logo Design).

Some time during the day of **Saturday, January 30** (most likely late morning or early afternoon), you will receive an email with a **link to a Google folder**. In the Google folder you will find:

- a **spreadsheet for recording your scores and comments** electronically (“! Judge Sheet - EventName”)
- the **critique sheet** for the event (“0 Critique Sheet - EventName”),
- this **Instructions** document (“1 Instructions to Virtual Judges for 2027”),
- and the **PDFs containing the students’ entries** (exception: for Digital Logo Design, the students may choose to submit their logos as a GIF, a JPG, or a PNG, and they will also submit a separate PDF with documentation of their design process).

You have until 11:59 p.m. on Tuesday, February 2 (Central Time) to do your judging. You do not need to consult with the other judge(s) of the event unless there are ties in the top 10, in which case you should email each other and decide how to break the ties. All ties must be broken by the judges. If you don’t notice the ties, I’ll catch them as I tally the results on Wednesday, February 3, and contact you. Results will be announced at Houstonfest on February 6.

Now let’s consider the critique sheets, judging spreadsheets, and PDFs separately:

Critique Sheets

We will provide you an electronic copy of the critique sheet. There will be a copy in the Google folder and a copy in the second tab of the judging spreadsheet (which may look a bit different, but the differences are only cosmetic). If you like to work on paper, you may wish to print multiple copies of the critique sheet and make notes on them as you evaluate each entry, or just print one copy to refer to throughout. Others will probably find it unnecessary to print the critique sheet at all, preferring to refer to it on the computer screen. Whatever works for you! In any case, you will NOT submit any actual critique sheets, either electronically or in hard copy, to me.

Judging Spreadsheets

The judging spreadsheets are Google “Sheets” that open in your internet browser. While it is possible to download the spreadsheet and work in a locally-saved version of it, please don’t. Just work in the online Google environment. The spreadsheet saves every change you make automatically, so there’s no need to “save” it. I can also access it through the shared Google folder, so there’s no need to email it to me. When you’re finished, simply close the window. If you don’t finish in one sitting, you can come back to it later and pick up where you left off.

The spreadsheet will have the names and schools of the contestants already populated and a row (labeled with your name) for each judge to enter scores and comments for that contestant. There will be three rows for three judges to score each entry, but in some events, there may be only two judges. In that case, leave the rows for “Judge 3” blank.

There will be columns for you to enter your scores for each of the judging criteria listed on the critique sheet. Refer to the critique sheets themselves for a more detailed description of each criterion. In each event there are 5 criteria for judging, each scored between 0 and 20 points. The spreadsheets are set to reject any scores outside the correct range, so it will “catch” you if, for instance, you try to enter 28 for a criterion that’s worth only 20 points. In all events, the maximum score for an entry from any one judge is 100. The spreadsheet will add up your scores on all the criteria automatically and calculate the combined score from the two or three judges (so you don’t have to do any math!).

Please do not attempt to type in the totals columns; by doing so, you could overwrite the formula that adds up the scores. Those columns should be “protected” so that you won’t be able to type in them, but if that system fails and you accidentally type in a total column, press Control + Z to undo it. That will restore the formula.

At the far right of the spreadsheet is a column to enter **comments**. Please do make a few comments for each entry; the comments will be shared with the teachers and students, and they really do take the comments to heart. The space is small, but you can type as much as you want and you’ll be able to see everything you’ve typed until you press enter. The cell will not expand in size, though, so after pressing enter you’ll see only the first few words. However, your entire comment is still there; if you want to read back over your comments, double-click in each comment box to see the whole thing (and edit/add to it if you want). One benefit of this is that judges won’t see each other’s entire comments (at least not without some effort) and won’t be influenced by the other judges’ opinions.

As always, we ask that you **be merciful and kind in your scoring and comments**. **Try to keep your total score for each entry at 70 or above**. In your comments, STAY POSITIVE and CONSTRUCTIVE. “Work on x, y, and z,” not “Your x, y, and z were bad.” These students are putting in extra time and effort to participate in this contest. We don’t want to discourage them in any way but rather build them up and encourage them to keep learning German! See some sample comments on the last page of these instructions.

Judging Spreadsheets: Deductions

Rather than *disqualify* an entry for any reason (time-limit violation, forgotten lines, etc.), deduct what you deem to be a fitting number of points from an appropriate criterion, for instance, from “Selection and Preparation.”

For the specific types of violations listed below, there is a **standard 10-point deduction** off the **cumulative score** (not off each judge’s individual score). There is a column in the judging spreadsheet where you can check if there should be a 10-point deduction, but if you check it, at least one judge should make a comment about why the points were deducted. The Google Sheet will take the 10-point deduction just once off the grand total regardless of whether one, two, or three judges check the deduction, but it looks better if all judges check it so that there doesn’t appear to have been disagreement.

- **failure to provide the poetry/prose selection or script** as required for Poetry/Prose Reading and Short Film
- **clear evidence that a video consists of several bits edited together rather than one continuous take** as required in the rules (exception: in the Short Film category, editing is allowed and indeed encouraged!)
- **failure to include at least the contestant’s name and school** in the PDF for Digital Logo Design and Photo Essay (this ought to apply to all events, but the wording about a 10-point penalty is only in the rules for those two events)

Even though it is possible for entries to “merit” two different deductions, **the most we will take is one deduction per entry**. The first judge who notices one of these violations can check the deduction column in the spreadsheet, and if any judges who come along later disagree that there should be a deduction, all the judges should consult briefly by email to come to a consensus.

Evaluating Student Submissions (PDFs): Specific Instructions for Each Event

Digital Logo Design: Open the GIF/JPG/PNG for each entry and evaluate the image that you find. There are two ways to access the images: 1) In the judging spreadsheet, there will be links to the submissions to the right of each student’s name and school (in column G, “Logo Image”). Clicking once on the link will pull up a small window and clicking once inside that window will open the image; OR 2) you can open each submission from the Google folder that was shared with you. The links inside the judging spreadsheet are probably more convenient. Separately, each entry should also have a PDF with identifying information (name(s), school, etc.) and documentation of the design process. Again, these can be accessed two ways: 1) links in the judging spreadsheet (in column H, “Logo Documentation”) or 2) from a separate folder called “Logo Documentation (File Responses)” in your main Google folder.

Photo Essay: Open the PDF for each entry and evaluate what you find. There are two ways to access the PDFs: 1) In the judging spreadsheet, there will be links to the submissions to the right of each student’s name and school (in column G). Clicking once on the link will pull up a small window and clicking once inside that window will open the image; OR 2) you can open each submission from the Google folder that was shared with you. The links inside the judging spreadsheet are probably more convenient. The PDF should contain identifying information (student name(s) and school) and the photo essay itself, which should consist of a series of pictures accompanied by captions telling a story. Students do have the option to create a physical photo essay with printed photographs pasted on a poster board and then take pictures of the poster to submit electronically, but seriously, I don’t think anyone is going to do that. ☺

Oral Presentation, Poetry Reading, Prose Reading, Short Film: Open the PDF for each entry. There are two ways to access the PDFs: 1) In the judging spreadsheet, there will be links to the PDFs to the right of each student’s name and school (in column G). Clicking once on the link will pull up a small window and clicking once inside that window will open the PDF; OR 2) you can open each PDF from the Google folder that was shared with you. The links inside the judging spreadsheet are probably more convenient. In the PDF you should find identifying information (student name(s) and school) and the **script** (for Short Film), the **poem** (for Poetry Reading), or the **prose piece** (for Prose Reading) so that you can read along as you watch their recording. Oral Presentation does NOT have to have a script, but if the presentation includes visual aids, those are supposed to be included in the PDF. Most importantly, you should find a **YouTube or Vimeo hyperlink** to the video of the performance. Click on that link to view and evaluate the performance. Having the students provide a link is much more efficient than having them upload the actual video files, which are often many, many megabytes in size. This system has the advantage over live judging that you can pause and rewatch the videos if you want to. As mentioned above under “Deductions,” our rule is that all these recordings should be done in a single take (except in Short Film, where we welcome editing). When making their videos, the students can do as many takes as they want until they get one that they like, but they can’t edit bits and pieces of different takes together. They have to settle on one continuous take to upload. **If you see clear evidence that they have edited various pieces together into one video, check the 10-point deduction column and note it in the comments.**

Research Paper: Open the PDF for each entry. There are two ways to access the PDFs: 1) In the judging spreadsheet, there will be links to the PDFs to the right of each student’s name and school (in column G). Clicking once on the link will pull up a small window and clicking once inside that window will open the PDF; OR 2) you can open each PDF from the Google folder that was shared with you. The links inside the judging spreadsheet are probably more convenient. The paper should contain identifying information (student name(s), school, date and title at the top of page 1), the research paper itself, the bibliography (Works Cited), and perhaps an appendix with any supporting pictures and links to any supporting audio materials. The rules tell the contestants to follow the latest **MLA guidelines** for formatting and citing sources. If we were judging this event in person, I would provide you a copy of the latest (9th) edition of the *MLA Handbook*, but that does you no good as you sit at home evaluating the papers. Use your own judgment about how picky to be about MLA style; if you’re well versed in it (or want to look up the rules online), go for it, and if not, concentrate on content and take off for format only if it’s egregiously bad. Perhaps the three of you could email each other early in the judging process, and if one of you is an MLA expert or wants to become one, designate that person as the format guru. At a minimum, the paper should be double-spaced and in an easily-readable font (the rules specify 12-point Times New Roman or Arial). We’re of course concerned about **plagiarism and, nowadays, the use of AI**. Thus, we have asked the students to write their papers in a Google Doc and submit that link as well. You don’t have those links, but I will review each paper’s “revision history” within Google Docs that shows all the editing steps from blank page to finished product and highlights any blocks of text that were pasted into the document. This is not a perfect system for detecting plagiarism or use of AI, but it’s the best we’ve got. I will email you if I find anything “suspicious” in a paper.

Sample Constructive Comments

Way to go!	I appreciate all of the effort you put into this event.	Adequately executed.
Keep up the good work!		Excellent, don’t change a thing.
Good job!	Very detailed, good job.	Super!
You are on the right track. Try to ____ better.	Flawless execution.	I can tell you have a lot of passion for this project.
I can tell you worked really hard!	Good attention to detail.	Sounds good, but ask your teacher to help you with ____.
Great progress!	Stupendous!	Well done! I look forward to seeing your work again next year!
Great effort!	Very impressive!	
I can tell you spent a lot of time preparing this.	Wonderful way to represent your school.	
	Good, but work on ____.	
You are on top of your game!	Excellent!	
	Perhaps more ____.	