

## 2026 NINA COMPETITION RULES AND ENTRY INFORMATION

1. Publication period for the contest is May 1, 2025, to April 30, 2026. Entries submitted must have been published in newspapers or on websites during this period except for the General Excellence (website) category, which will be judged during June, July and/or August. The deadline to submit entries is Monday, Aug. 3, 2026.
2. Questions regarding membership status and dues should be addressed to Shelley Hendricks at 815-753-4239 or via email to [shendricks@niu.edu](mailto:shendricks@niu.edu).
3. Content of all entries must be original work.
4. (\*\*NEW) AI-assisted reporting is permitted provided the entrant discloses how AI was used in the entry form and the story explains how it was used. AI may be used as a reporting or research tool but may not replace original reporting, writing, editing or editorial judgment. Entrants remain responsible for the accuracy of all submitted work. The first principles of journalism should apply just as forcefully when machines are involved. Readers must be able to trust that any information presented to them is factually accurate and meeting the high standards of the news organization. We should tell readers how our work was created and, if we make substantial use of generative A.I., explain how we mitigated risks, such as bias or inaccuracy, with human oversight.
5. Most entries must be submitted as PDFs, JPGs or URLs at <http://www.newspapercontest.com/NINA>. ***If submitted via URL and material is behind a paywall, judges must be able to access content or the entry will be disqualified. There is a place to include judge signon/password information in the entry form.***
6. The entry fee for NINA members is \$6 per entry. The nonmember entry fee is \$9 per entry. There is no limit to the number of entries per nameplate for most categories (see individual category rules). This change primarily was made to facilitate freelancer participation. Please continue to enter only highest-caliber work so as not to overburden judges.
7. The General Excellence awards continue to replace the sweepstakes award (see General Excellence section below for more information). Each category description explains these and other limits.
8. Judges will be selected by NIU based on academic and/or professional expertise. Judges typically are NIU journalism faculty, other journalism educators in the region and/or professional journalists not associated with the contest. However, accomplished professionals and/or scholars with relevant subject matter expertise who are not journalists or journalism educators may also serve as judges. Judges will be provided contest rules and relevant category entry information.
9. Winners in each category will be awarded a certificate. Judges will award a first, second and third place in each category and an honorable mention if warranted unless the number of entries precludes it, in which case there will always be a first-place winner.

10. If judges think an entry has been wrongly categorized or is inappropriate for the category, they should notify the contest coordinator. The contest coordinator has the power to reclassify entries after consulting with NINA executive officers. The coordinator also may combine daily/nondaily entries into one group if warranted by fewer than three entries in an individual circulation category.

### **CLASSIFICATION OF PUBLICATIONS**

Contests are divided into two classifications of NINA publications. The nondailies group includes all newspapers published fewer than four times a week and includes online-only publications. The daily group includes all newspapers published four or more times a week and includes all newspapers printed as inserts in those dailies. Sunday editions are eligible for entry. If any daily publication makes a significant contribution to a weekly paper's content, that work should be entered in the daily contest category. Entrants may enter in only one classification.

### **GENERAL EXCELLENCE FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS**

Presented in the daily and nondaily categories for overall General Excellence (print) rather than accumulation of points from other contest categories. Each paper will submit PDFs of 3 complete editions. Each nameplate or flag will be judged individually. For this contest year, papers should submit one date of the submitter's choosing in addition to the issues from Sept. 1, 2025, and March 3, 2026. Papers that did not publish on these dates should submit the issues closest to those dates. Judges will use a 100-point system to review each entry.

Points will be assigned as follows:

- 1-20 points— Quality of local news and feature content
- 1-20 points— Enterprise, In-depth/watchdog reporting
- 1-20 points— Editorial page leadership/reader engagement
- 1-15 points— Quality of sports content
- 1-15 points— Use of photos/multimedia content
- 1-10 points— Design: Page layout; Headlines; Use of art, graphics, info boxes, effective flags to related online content.

### **GENERAL EXCELLENCE FOR ONLINE PUBLICATIONS**

Judged on overall content and design, local emphasis, interactivity, ease of navigation and extra features not found in the print edition. Entry: Include URL of the website in "URL" field of the online entry box. One entry per publication.

### **CONTEST AND AWARDS SPONSORSHIP**

The Journalism Program of the NIU Department of Communication conducts this contest (in cooperation with the Northern Illinois News Association) and sponsors awards for this contest. The department reserves exclusive rights in determining, in accordance with contest rules, the eligibility of entries, judging of entries, and awarding recognition.

## **CONTEST CATEGORY AND ENTRY INFORMATION**

**BEST DESIGN (PRINT PUBLICATIONS ONLY):** Awarded to a newspaper showing excellence in design, including typography, photo/graphics use, and general appearance. Front page will be considered the most important factor, but other news, sports, feature and opinion pages and display of advertising also will be considered. Entries should consist of three issues published during the contest year. Entry should consist of one PDF per issue (three PDFs total); each PDF will have multiple pages. Do not upload each page as its own PDF. Entry: Submit three complete issues. One entry per publication.

**BEST GENERAL FEATURE:** For a single feature article, as contrasted with a spot/breaking news story, not covered in the Personality Profile category. Judged on news value, quality of reporting and writing and local focus. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Please write the headline in the “explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box.

**BEST PERSONALITY PROFILE:** For single personality profile, as contrasted with a spot/breaking news story, profiling a person. Judged on news value, quality of reporting and writing and local focus. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Please write the headline in the “explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box.

**OWEN PHELPS AWARD/BEST RELIGION STORY:** For a single story that illuminates issues of faith and/or spirituality in everyday life. Judged on news value, quality of reporting and writing and local focus. Sidebars published the same day may be included as part of the entry. Entry: submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Please write a headline in the “explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box.

**BEST BUSINESS/FINANCIAL/CONSUMER STORY:** May be either news or feature story. Judged on news value, quality of reporting and writing and local focus. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Please write a headline in the explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box.

**BEST TECHNOLOGY/MEDICAL STORY:** For a locally developed story reporting, explaining or interpreting technology, science, health or medical subjects. Story may be either feature or news but should focus on technological advances as related to people in your community. Judged on news value, quality of reporting and writing and local focus. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Please write headline in the “explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box.

**BEST SPORTS STORY:** Judged on news value, quality of reporting and writing and local focus. Single story. Sidebars published the same day may be included as part of entry. No columns. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Please write the headline in the “explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box.

**BEST COLUMNIST:** For the best three locally developed bylined columns (as contrasted to unsigned editorials). Non-sports. Judged on originality, voice, quality of writing and local focus. Entry: Submit three columns by the same writer. Submit PDFs

or URLs clearly marked. Write the headlines in the “explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box. Limit one entry by an individual writer.

**BEST EDITORIAL:** For best single editorial on a local issue. Judged on quality of writing and strength of argument and suggested solutions. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Write the headline in the “explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box, along with the name and staff position of the individual(s) who composed the editorial.

**BEST SPOT NEWS PHOTO:** Judged on urgency/news value of the image, composition, technical quality and cutline information gathered. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. In the “explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box, please write a brief description of the photo. Photos must be submitted as published, not as standalone files.

**BEST FEATURE PHOTO:** Judged on composition, technical quality, emotional appeal, news value and cutline assistance. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. In the “explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box, please write a brief description of the photo. Photos must be submitted as published, not standalone files.

**BEST SPORTS PHOTO:** Judged on news value, composition, technical quality, emotional appeal and cutline assistance. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. In the “explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box, please write a brief description of the photo. Photos must be submitted as published, not standalone files.

**BEST ONLINE PHOTO GALLERY:** Entry should consist of a series of related photos from a single event, presented online with or without related audio. Judged on news value, emotional appeal, composition and technical quality of individual photos, plus cohesiveness of the entire gallery. Cutlines will be considered in judging. Entry: Include URL of the gallery in “URL” field of the online entry box.

**BEST SPOT NEWS STORY:** Judged on news value/urgency, quality of reporting and writing and local focus. Single story. May include related sidebars from the same issue. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Entries that represent a team effort should list team members and designate lead writer or editor. Please write headline(s) in the “explanation or cutline” field of the online entry box.

**BEST IN-DEPTH REPORTING:** Judged on news value, quality of reporting and writing and local focus in a planned, scheduled story or series of stories about any one topic. Judged on news value, evidence of investigative work, organization, visual presentation, headline writing, graphics, photography and multimedia presentation. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Entries that represent a team effort should list team members and designate lead writer or editor. Please write headline(s) on the entry form.

**BEST EDUCATION REPORTING:** For excellence in education reporting as demonstrated by a single writer’s best three stories from the contest year. Judged on news value, variety, quality of reporting and writing and local focus. Supplemental

online material also may be entered. Entry: Three separate stories by one writer. Submit PDFs and/or URLs and clearly indicate the entries in the “explanation or outline” field of the online entry box.

**BEST SOCIAL JUSTICE/FIRST AMENDMENT REPORTING:** Award recognizes excellence in responsible journalism in covering issues important to the local community, shining a light on stories that otherwise may not have been exposed to the public. This award recognizes excellence in reporting that highlights the importance of a free press, especially in coverage of state, county, or local government. Special weight will be given to reporting that uncovers actions detrimental to the public good and which might have otherwise remained hidden. Can include issues such as politics, finance, race, immigration, court actions and sports. etc. Must be current, not historical. Judging will be based on quality of writing and local importance. Each entry may be single stories, stories with sidebars, or a series of a maximum of five stories. Entries may be accompanied by a letter describing the impact of the news coverage and obstacles overcome to get the story. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Write headlines in the “explanation or outline” field of the online entry box.

**BEST WATCHDOG REPORTING:** For excellence in performing the watchdog function in a single story or in an unscheduled series of stories that reveals wrongdoing in government, nonprofit organizations, private business, education, law enforcement, military or other institutions. Judges should consider reporting enterprise, barriers to obtaining the information, accuracy, clarity of analysis and writing style. Judges may consider civic impact and evaluate the circumstances prompting the coverage and results achieved. Entries in this category may NOT also be entered in the Best In-Depth Reporting category. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Entries that represent a team effort should list team members and designate lead writer or editor. Please write headline(s) on the entry form.

**BEST HISTORICAL FEATURE:** This award will recognize an excellent single story or series of up to three stories that brings local history to life. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Please write headlines in the “explanation or outline” field of the online entry box.

**BEST LOCALIZED NEWS STORY:** Entries should be stories in which local facts have been added to a state, national or international story. Judges will consider the clarity and relevance to readers as well as readability, originality and impact on the local community. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. Please write headlines in the “explanation or outline” field of the online entry box.

**BEST SPECIAL EVENTS COVERAGE:** This category honors excellence in the coverage of a significant news event that was scheduled in advance. These may include community events such as Business, Education, Religious, Ethnic or Sporting events, among others. Entries should include advance, same-day and follow-up event reporting. They might include such things as how the event was planned and carried

out; what it presented that was newsworthy or engaging; and what the post-event assessment was for the event's organizers, such as success of revenue from attendees/sponsors, overall attendance, new subscribers/readers, social media reaction, and overall engagement with the audience. An entry may include up to a three-part before, during and after reporting and may include print or digital efforts. The size of the event is not important unless it was a factor in the organizing and reporting. Judges will consider the quality of the journalism; design of the steps in coverage; attention to detail; and, overall uniqueness and success/impact of the event.

**SPECIAL PUBLICATIONS/SPECIAL SECTIONS:** Open to any special issue, section, magazine, newsletter or specialty publication published during the contest year and distributed in a local market. Entries may be published in print or digital format and must not be published more than six times per year. Judged on overall quality of content, local relevance, writing, design, photography, graphics, typography, organization and reader engagement. Advertising integration and overall presentation also may be considered. Entry: Submit PDFs or URLs clearly marked. For print publications, submit a complete PDF of the publication or section. For digital publications, submit a URL and any information necessary for judges to access the content.