

Topic of the National English Language Competition 2021/2022:

Distances that Separate and Connect

The overall aim of the National English Language Competition is to create interest in topics concerning the English language and the societies and cultures of the UK, USA and other English-speaking countries. We seek to develop students' understanding of different cultural phenomena and intercultural links, but especially to guide them to see the points of connection between the English and Estonian culture through independent research and analysis. The general aim is to encourage students with academic interests in their first scholarly endeavours and to offer them an opportunity to hone their skills of research, analysis and writing in English. Using English in this creative project develops the higher-level writing skills that are required in international examinations as well as during further university studies. This not only meets one of the requirements of the Estonian National Curriculum but also improves analytical and writing skills that students will need on entering the labour market.

This year we want to initiate a discussion about the period and after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic deeply affected our interconnected global world and thus also Estonia's contacts with the English-speaking world. The world had to change its habits of travel and communication. Different public health measures introduced the need for new communication tools to inform the public about the emerging scientific knowledge and technologies for education, professional life and staying in touch with our friends and family. Although the pandemic separated us from one another, it also created the potential for new connections. The pandemic was also an infodemic in which information of all kinds travelled across the world at a great speed. This, too, created new connections and collaboration, but also revealed cultural differences and the need for careful analysis and translation.

In this research paper, we invite you to think broadly about the cultural and communicative aspects of the pandemic and the post-pandemic world, especially in comparisons between Estonia and the English-speaking world.

We expect independent student research papers (10-15 double-spaced pages in 12-point Times New Roman font; for general guidelines see How to write a research paper). The papers are to show some background research but also to contain a clear section of independent analysis by the student. The paper should focus on one subject area and clearly formulate a narrower research question within the area (some suggestions are given below). In view of the length of the paper, the topic should be relatively narrow to enable its in-depth analysis. The list below is not exhaustive but rather seeks to demonstrate the wealth of topics available and to stimulate students' imagination and creativity. We are not giving one precise topic but want to see students' ability to select an appropriate topic area, define a research question or hypothesis, gather information about it, analyse the information and draw conclusions from it.

Assessment

The papers will be assessed by the jury of the competition in one round and two stages. In the first stage the jury will assess the written paper, its content and its accordance to the

requirements set for the projects (see How to Write the Research Project). The analytical side of the paper will be the main focus. Up to 15 best papers will advance to the second stage of assessment. The second stage will take place at the University of Tartu in the form of a mini conference where all participants will present the results of their research orally (the use of visual aids is permitted). This stage will assess the students' command of the topic of their paper, their ability to present the results in an oral presentation and to respond to spontaneous questions on the topic of the paper.

Possible research topics within the general theme:

- Media representation of the pandemic (e.g., how did different newspapers in the English-speaking world write about the pandemic and the different public health measures?). You can either focus on one newspaper or compare newspapers from different countries and focus on, for example, topics covered (economy, health, science, etc.), language choice or multimodal features. It is also possible to compare an English-language media source with an Estonian one to identify cultural similarities and differences
- Representation of pandemics and isolation in fiction (e.g. different forms of science fiction), TV or films. The questions you may want to focus on are as follows: how have pandemics and isolation been imagined before? How was the COVID-19 pandemic different?
- Representation of the COVID-19 pandemics and the related measures in internet folklore (memes, etc.)
- Science communication during the pandemic (e.g. how were different scientific discoveries and related public health measures communicated to the public in the media or in social media both by the government and by different research organizations). Again, you may focus on one English-speaking country or also create comparisons with Estonia.
- Analysis of the new terms that were created in English and Estonian during the pandemic and different lockdown measures, including different translation loans into English.
- Discussion of new means of communication that were used and popularized (e.g., to stay in touch with family and friends who lived abroad).
- Distance learning measures in Estonia and in the English-speaking world (e.g., what approaches and platforms were used? What innovations were added? How did the students and the teachers cope?