Welcome to the 2026 NACLO Invitational Round!

Congratulations on qualifying to the 2026 NACLO Invitational Round! This is a wonderful accomplishment, and you should be very proud of it! We recommend that you read this letter in full to get a sense of the main changes you should expect from the Open Round.

As a reminder, the Invitational Round takes place on **Thursday, March 19**.

Writing explanations for the Invitational Round

If this is your first time writing full explanations for a NACLO round, don't worry! It's not too complicated, but you should remember that part of your Invitational Round score is based on not only finding the phenomena, but also explaining them clearly.

An explanation to a NACLO problem takes the form of a short piece of writing, usually no more than a page, that explains how the language in the problem works, at least to the extent that you can work out. What you need to write will depend on the problem; still, there are some general principles that are almost always useful:

1. You should **be thorough**. Solutions often lose points because they leave out relevant pieces of the system, such as word order or the conditions under which a form appears.

   - Solutions are often places to pick up a good amount of partial credit for "simpler" observations that may not need full knowledge of the system to get!

   - Note that your solution should **NOT contain a dictionary**; there is no need to list out all words and their meanings, unless you find it paramount to your explanation. In general, you are only required to **describe the rules or patterns you found in the data** for full points.

2. You should **be specific**. It is usually not enough to say something broad like "subjects and objects are marked on nouns". A stronger explanation would say exactly how they are marked, where those markers appear, and when each one is used. For example, you might explain that subjects take one suffix, while objects take a different prefix.

3. You should **generalize**. If your explanation starts turning into a long list of isolated exceptions, there is probably a pattern that you have not yet identified. Points are usually only awarded for finding an underlying principle behind the data.

4. You do not need to explain *how* you got to your answer; i.e. you do not need to give logical steps like "comparing sentences 1 and 5, I found out the translation for *me*; then using that, ...". We care more about *what* you found than *how* you found it.

5. You should **write what the problem actually needs**. If you think that different classes of verbs behave differently, then you should be sure to explain not just what those behaviors are, but also which verbs belong to which class. (You could do this either by stating a general pattern, or by saying there is no pattern and listing the verbs in each class – this would be different from a dictionary, since here this *would* be very important for your solution to make sense!).

Summary

☞ Here is a general rule of thumb to judge if your solution is a good one: if someone can use *only* your solution as a grammar, and has access to a list of all words in the data and their English translations, would they be able to solve all the tasks?

Some practical advice

Here is a bit of advice on what to keep in mind while writing your solutions.

1. A solution does not need to be long to get points; in fact, the best solutions are often the shortest (correct) ones! A short explanation with the right generalizations is often much better than a page of disconnected observations.

2. Be clear! Long sentences are hard to understand, especially when you are explaining complicated phenomena. Don't hesitate to use headings, tables, and diagrams to get your ideas across clearly. Short paragraphs are often better than one large block of text.

3. Examples are helpful, but they are **not** a substitute for rules. If you give several forms from the data, make sure you write out what generalization those forms are illustrating.

4. Actively **double-check your work while writing up solutions**. Problems often have rules that can look right at first but turn out to be missing an important condition. Writing carefully often makes these gaps easier to notice.

5. Finally, this might be obvious, but it bears repeating: **make sure you answer the actual question being asked!** Sometimes the task is to identify a pattern in only the verbs. Sometimes it is to explain why two forms differ. Sometimes it is to describe the whole system. Your explanation should match!

A short example

Suppose a problem includes the following data from Examplish, an imaginary language:

naluma	"I eat"	*nalumati*	"I ate"
kaluma	"you eat"	*kalumati*	"you ate"
miluma	"she eats"	*milumati*	"she ate"

A good explanation would state the rule:

Verbs take a prefix that marks the subject (*na-* "I", *ka-* "you", *mi-* "she"). Past tense is marked by adding the suffix *-ti* to the verb.

This explanation allows someone to form new verbs. For example, if the verb *pira* means "run", then using the solution, someone could translate "I ran" as *napirati*. There is no need to explain *how* to get to this conclusion; only the patterns themselves are important.

Awards

These awards are intended to recognize outstanding performances, but regardless of the final results, reaching the Invitational Round itself is a remarkable accomplishment. We are proud of everything you have achieved so far, and we hope you take pride in your success!

Medals

All students who are selected for the USA and Canada Anglophone IOL teams will receive a Gold medal designation. Additionally, students who score above the mean will be awarded Honorable Mentions, while the cutoffs for the Silver and Bronze medal designation will be determined at the discretion of the Jury based on the overall distribution of scores.

Roughly, the ratio of gold:silver:bronze:HM will be 1:2:3:6, but this is not exact and subject to change.

Best Solution awards

For especially well-written solutions, we give out **Best Solution awards**. You do not need a fully perfect solution to get one of these awards; we judge these on several subjective criteria, including clarity and insightfulness. Beyond the medals, aiming for a Best Solution award is another way you can be recognized for your performance!

Closing remarks

The Invitational Round is a demanding contest; it is rare for anyone to solve every problem completely. Even arriving at a full and convincing solution to a single problem is already an excellent accomplishment!

In fact, simply maintaining focus and thinking carefully for the entire contest is something to be proud of. NACLO problems often reward patience: it is common to spend a long time exploring patterns, testing hypotheses, and refining explanations before everything fits together.

Our Program Committee has spent many months selecting a set of problems that we believe are interesting, surprising, and worth that effort. We hope that these problems stay with you after the contest ends: that you find yourself thinking about these languages intently and discover new phenomena you may have not thought possible. These problems are only a slice of the wide world of computational linguistics.

Congratulations again on reaching the Invitational Round, and best of luck!

Regards,
The 2026 NACLO Program Committee