



The Personal Philosophies
of Remarkable Men and Women

HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CURRICULUM

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Sample This I Believe Essays

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INTRODUCTION

THIS I BELIEVE: Reading and Writing Lessons to Create an Effective Personal Essay

From 1951 to 1955, Edward R. Murrow hosted *This I Believe*, a daily radio program that reached 39 million listeners. On this broadcast, Americans—both well known and unknown—read five-minute essays about their personal philosophy of life. They shared insights about individual values that shaped their daily actions. A first volume of *This I Believe* essays, published in 1952, sold 300,000 copies—more than any other book sold in the U. S. that year except for the Bible. In fact, these Murrow broadcasts were so popular that a curriculum was developed to encourage American high school students to compose essays about their most significant personal beliefs.

Fifty years later, This I Believe, Inc., is continuing the mission of inviting Americans of all ages and all walks of life to examine their belief systems and then write and share a 500-word personal essay, a “This I Believe” essay.

The following unit has been designed to help teachers seize this exciting opportunity to motivate students to write for an authentic purpose to real-world audiences. By utilizing lessons in this unit, teachers can guide students in writing a *This I Believe* essay appropriate both for inclusion in school writing publications and for possible broadcast on public radio, in newspapers, and on the Internet at www.thisibelieve.org.

NOTE

Drafting a personal philosophy of life can be difficult—even when writers have lived multiple decades. We encourage teachers to attempt this thought-provoking assignment along with your students to discover first-hand just how challenging this writing task really is!

We also urge teachers NOT to bypass prewriting and guided discussion activities that prepare students for producing a quality personal essay. Proceed slowly. Invest ample class time in front-loading, soul-searching, and model-reading. Your students’ first drafts will be far more effective and require less revision time.

This curriculum was developed by This I Believe, Inc., with invaluable input from Dottie Willis. We owe Ms. Willis a huge thank you for her work on developing—and implementing—this curriculum.

LESSON 1: WHAT IS A PERSONAL ESSAY?

1. A This I Believe essay is a personal essay. Show the following graphic organizer to help students understand basic differences between a personal essay, which is focused on a *belief or insight about life that is important to the writer*, and the two other forms of personal writing: the personal narrative and the memoir.

Personal essay	Focused on a <i>belief or insight about life</i> that is important to the writer
Personal narrative	Focused on an <i>important event</i>
Personal memoir	Focused on an <i>important relationship</i> between the writer and a person, place, or object

2. Explain that a personal essay often combines elements of **both** the narrative **and** the memoir since an insight about life or a personal belief is usually based upon both experiences and relationships that have taught the writer what individual values are most important.
3. If students need further clarification of the differences between a personal essay and the other two forms of personal expressive writing, divide the class into three sections for a reading strategy called “Question the Author.” Before groups of students read one of these three personal forms, instruct them to:
 - Look for the author’s **focused purpose** (What is the author trying to say here?)
 - Identify which **supporting details** in each piece most effectively contribute to the author’s purpose
 - Ask one class section to read **“My Pal, Robert”** (below). Or, you may choose another essay to demonstrate the characteristics of a Personal Narrative.
 - Ask a second class section to read **“My First Lifeline”** (below). Or, you may choose another essay to demonstrate the characteristics of a Personal Memoir.
 - Ask a third division of the class to read **“Accomplishing Big Things in Small Pieces”** (below). Or choose another essay that demonstrates the characteristics of a Personal Essay. (See the Attachments at the end of this document for additional This I Believe essays.)

NOTE: Lessons are organized by purpose, not by minutes in a class period. Any lesson may require more or less than one entire class period or block, depending upon your school’s schedule and the needs and interests of your students.

My Pal, Robert

Have you ever heard the saying, “Hindsight is 20/20?” Well, I don’t think that there is a week that goes by that that saying isn’t proved to me over and over again. One night this past spring I learned a little “look before you leap” lesson that taught me to more carefully evaluate the circumstances of a situation before I actually put myself in it.

I think it’s safe to say that I am a “weirdo magnet.” I firmly believe that when I am at my most vulnerable, a flashing sign appears on my head that only strange people can see that says, “TALK TO ME! TALK TO ME!” You may think I’m exaggerating, but trust me, I’m not.

Beginning in the month of April through the month of September, I work for a wonderful and efficient organization called the Cincinnati Reds. When I first started the job, I wasn’t quite comfortable driving myself to the stadium, so I had to rely on my mom to drop me off and pick me up. Since there is never a set time that I get off work, I would have to call my mom and then go wait for her outside at the service entrance. The approximate time was usually around 11:00 p.m. Usually there is a trusty security guard named Arnie who works at the service entrance. You know the type, about sixty-five years old and couldn’t protect you from anything even if he wasn’t sleeping or missing in action.

So picture this: It’s 11:00 at night, I’m standing outside the service entrance alone, all dressed up and looking like the perfect target for any psychopath that happens to be in the area. I guess this might be a good time to describe what it’s like at the service entrance. The tunnel itself is dark, cold, smelly, and there is always some unidentified substance dripping from the ceiling. At the head of the tunnel there is a little security guard shack where the smell of a burning illegal substance is often present. There is also an entrance to the other field, a room for the night (clean-up) crew, and a metal folding chair where Arnie usually sits when he is around. Around this entrance is reserved parking for important people and it is generally the place where the night crew hangs out. Now I don’t want to be mean, but a night crew member who is not on probation of some sort is the exception to the rule.

Anyway, as you can imagine I was feeling kind of nervous, and of course, Arnie was nowhere to be found. Normally someone would wait with me for my parents, but the circumstances were out of the ordinary. As I was standing there outside the service entrance, that horrible feeling came over me that you get when you feel someone’s eyes on you, and I could see someone coming towards me out of the corner of my eye. Rather than just stand there awkwardly, I turned face to face with the person hoping and praying that he wasn’t going to touch me, talk to me, or maybe ABDUCT me.

When he got about two inches from my face he said hoarsely, “Hi, I’m Robert.” His breath reeked of alcohol and a mixture of some other things like, oh, I don’t know, garbage? I was inwardly freaking out. His appearance was even more unsettling. He was a guy about my height, was wearing a dirty bandana around his head that I think was white at one time, and he had one tooth in the front of his mouth that had a sign on it that said, “Next tooth—one mile.” “Hi,” I responded, trying to keep my cool. *Where are you Arnie?* I thought to myself. “What’s your name?” he asked. *Oh, no, he’s trying to pick up on me!* I thought. I contemplated making up a fake name, but my mind went blank. “Erin,” I responded, while shaking like a leaf.

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“That’s a pretty name,” he said. Of course I could have said my name was Bertha Sue and he probably still would have said it was pretty. Every minute seemed like an eternity as I struggled to be polite and make small talk with my new pal. I kept inching away from him but he kept moving forward to make up for it. Every time he attempted to make conversation, I cordially gave him one-word answers with a forced smile. I couldn’t help but feel a little guilty for the way I was acting, even though I was scared to death.

“You shouldn’t be standing out here by yourself. Somebody could do something to you, you know? That wouldn’t be right,” he said, looking me up and down and making me want to crawl out of my skin. *Yeah, people like you!* I wanted to scream. Finally, after what seemed like years, but was probably only five minutes, my mom and step-dad pulled up. By that time Arnie (the trusty security guard) had materialized, but had taken no notice of my predicament. I grabbed my bag, took off at world record speed towards the car, and yelled over my shoulder, “There’s my mom, bye!” Oh, but it wasn’t over yet. My source of torture couldn’t let me get away that easily. He followed me over to the car. No, I am not joking. As I opened the door, Robert stepped up to the car.

“Hi, I’m Robert” He said, extending his hand. My mom shook it to be polite. “I’ve been watching your daughter for ya.” My mom was at a loss for words. “Uh, thanks,” she said. “See ya later.” She slammed the car door and as we drove away, I began to think about what had happened. I don’t know what Robert wanted. Maybe his intentions were good, and maybe they weren’t. Either way, I was never in any real danger. Even though I was scared, I could have been a little more polite. People are people, no matter what.

However, I don’t think I’ll ever wait for my ride alone again.

My First Life Line

Throughout my six years as an elementary school student, I was a helpless victim, drowning in a sea of stressful book reports and searching for a way to express myself in open-ended questions. As I entered middle school, however, a life preserver was thrown to me. From the moment it appeared, I held on tightly until my rescuer taught me to swim on my own.

Mrs. Smith was the high-ranking “officer” at our middle school, whose sole purpose was to whip her “gifted but undisciplined kids” into shape. I take that back. Introducing sixth-graders to ulcers was another likely item on her agenda. She had a natural march in her step, setting the admired and ideal pace for others to follow. Mrs. Smith performed classroom procedures as though she had repeatedly practiced each one determined to achieve perfection. She was always neat and proper, never a single hair on her head nor a red pen on her desk out of place. The clarity of her voice demanded respect and attention, while her tone was often quite frightening. “My class will separate the men from the boys; the women from the girls; the writers from the dummies.” Despite her intimidating features, I found myself admiring, even liking this drill sergeant. Her gleaming smile could provide warmth like rays of sunshine and was always accompanied by some explanatory hand motion. She rarely grinned without providing some sort of manual or verbal gesture. Mrs. Smith was extremely blunt with her opinions—complimentary as well as critical ones. She was honest and truthful, with no strings attached. When asked for help, she would always respond, “I’d love to help you fix the mess you’ve created, so that someday, you might pass.” Due to the bitingly honest quality of her critiques, I feared the day she would evaluate one of my papers in class.

Nervously awaiting the return of our first essays my heart thumped with anxiety. Suddenly, her piercing voice cracked my security shell that had hidden me for the past six years. “Well, I can see that there is some potential buried beneath all that mumbo-jumbo. The hard part is just digging it out!” Confused, I searched for the correct response and answered, “Um, Mrs. Smith I don’t have a shovel to dig.” Of course Mrs. Smith replied, “That’s quite all right. You can use your hands. Pick up that pencil and go to work.” Until the bell rang, that day, I was lost in a maze of red ink. My goal was to distinguish between “mumbo-jumbo” writing and writing that, with editing, and more editing, might become worthy for Mrs. Smith herself to read. Overwhelmed with excitement, I was determined to receive a “well-written” comment from Mrs. Smith or at least a “not so mumboy-jumboy!” Sweat, tears, and a lack of sleep were all included in my “IMPRESS MRS. SMITH MISSION.” Although I was unaware of it at the time, her lovingly strict attitude and personality had already begun to inspire me.

Mrs. Smith’s sweet perfume danced happily through the air, luring me into her room the following day at school. Once again, we turned in our essays and awaited the dreaded comments. Her constant nail tapping was a tension building clock, a constant reminder of the doom that awaited us all. She always selected her “victims” for each new day, and then focused on her helpless “prey.” With magnetic eyes, she would irresistibly and forcefully draw students’ attention to her. With each point of her finger, I waited for her nail to lift me out of my chair and onto my feet. Eventually, it did. “Well, William,” she always had to recognize the writer before the humiliation could begin, “I’m quite impressed. You read my ‘red pen advice’ and actually applied it when you rewrote this paper. I’m really impressed.”

At that moment, Ernest Hemingway and Edgar Allen Poe were my equals. Even Shakespeare himself could not have put my sixth-grade essay to shame. Just because they had created several masterpieces did not mean they were “Mrs. Smith Approved.” Whose essay had “impressed” Mrs. Smith? Mine!

I longed to rush across the room, wrap my arms around her, and burst into joyful tears. Did she realize what her words meant to me? I desperately wanted to embrace her. For the first time, someone had taken time to work with me, guide me, and have faith in me and my ability to write. She helped me find a writing style suitable and meaningful to me. If only she could understand how I truly admired and viewed her as a “teacher,” someone who earned and deserved that special title. Words of praise and gratitude filled my mind as I began to pour my heart out to this miraculous lady. Yet, as a lump rose in my throat, I simply muttered. “Thanks, Mrs. Smith.” For the first time, without any words, gestures, or laughter, Mrs. Smith just smiled.

Accomplishing Big Things in Small Pieces

By William Wissemann

I carry a Rubik's Cube in my backpack. Solving it quickly is a terrific conversation starter and surprisingly impressive to girls. I've been asked to solve the cube on the New York City subway, at a track meet in Westchester and at a café in Paris. I usually ask people to try it first. They turn the cube over in their hands, half-heartedly they make a few moves and then sheepishly hand it back. They don't even know where to begin. That's exactly what it was like for me to learn how to read. Letters and words were scrambled and out of sequence. Nothing made sense because I'm dyslexic.

Solving the Rubik's Cube has made me believe that sometimes you have to take a few steps back to move forward. This was a mirror of my own life when I had to leave public school after the fourth grade. It's embarrassing to admit, but I still couldn't consistently spell my full name correctly.

As a fifth-grader at a new school, specializing in what's called language processing disorder, I had to start over. Memorizing symbols for letters, I learned the pieces of the puzzle of language, the phonemes that make up words. I spent the next four years learning how to learn and finding strategies that allowed me to return to my district's high school with the ability to communicate my ideas and express my intelligence.

It took me four weeks to teach myself to solve the cube—the same amount of time it took the inventor, Erno Rubik. Now, I can easily solve the 3x3x3, and the 4x4x4, and the Professor's Cube, the 5x5x5. I discovered that just before it solves, a problem can look like a mess, and then suddenly you can find the solution. I believe that progress comes in unexpected leaps.

Early in my Rubik's career, I became so frustrated that I took the cube apart and rebuilt it. I believe that sometimes you have to look deeper and in unexpected places to find answers. I noticed that I can talk or focus on other things and still solve the cube. There must be an independent part of my brain at work, able to process information.

The Rubik's cube taught me that to accomplish something big, it helps to break it down into small pieces. I learned that it's important to spend a lot of time thinking, to try to find connections and patterns. I believe that there are surprises around the corner. And, that the Rubik's cube and I, we are more than the sum of our parts.

Like a difficult text or sometimes like life itself, the Rubik's Cube can be a frustrating puzzle. So I carry a cube in my backpack as a reminder that I can attain my goals, no matter what obstacles I face.

And did I mention that being able to solve the cube is surprisingly impressive to girls?

LESSON 2: HOW IS A PERSONAL ESSAY DIFFERENT FROM TRANSACTIVE WRITING?

1. On the board or on an overhead, show **Personal Essay vs. Transactive Writing**. The chart on the following page contrasts major differences between personal essays and transactive pieces. Because many students confuse these two forms of writing, you can avoid potential problems through proactive teaching and class discussion using two essays of your own choosing. (See the Attachments section at the end of this curriculum for more sample This I Believe essays, or visit www.thisibelieve.org for archived This I Believe essays).
2. Read *This I Believe* or other essays of your choice that follow this lesson plan. Most are personal essays, as the title suggests; however, the two models provided for this lesson illustrate the differences between personal writing and transactive writing.
 - Divide the class into pairs for a Think-Pair-Share reading strategy.
 - Assign one member of each twosome to read silently an essay of your own choosing, provided it is an example of a personal essay.
 - Assign the second partner to read an essay or editorial of your own choosing. Choose an example of a transactive piece, designed to persuade the reader to think or act in a certain way.
 - Ask students to summarize the article for their assigned partners and direct them to infer and explain to each other what the author's purpose was in writing each article.
 - Based on their partner's summary and the pair's sharing of ideas, require all students to vote by a show of hands on which essay is transactive and which best fits criteria for a personal essay.
 - Call on students to explain their answers by giving evidence from each article to support their reasons for the differences.
 - **When you begin pre-writing exercises for the This I Believe essay, please remind students that this essay assignment is not a transactive piece, one in which the writer tries to influence others' opinions. Please emphasize the personal and reflective nature of the This I Believe essay.**

Personal Essay vs. Transactive Writing

Personal Essay	Transactive Writing
Communicates the significance of a central idea or insight that has a <u>deep personal meaning to the writer</u>	Conveys information to a reader who knows less than the writer; may attempt to persuade a reader to take a particular action or believe a certain way
Purpose is <u>more reflective</u> , although the tone may sound persuasive	Purpose is more persuasive, an attempt to convince others to agree with the writer's position
Development of the piece is <u>based upon the writer's personal experiences or anecdotes</u>	Development of the piece is based upon research from credible sources
<u>Written in first person</u> ; more conversational or entertaining in style	Written in third person; more issue-driven and formal or academic in style
Appears in an essay or op-ed format	Appears in a real-world form such as a letter, an editorial, or a feature article
More subjective in tone	More objective in tone
Rarely requires documentation (sources, footnotes, etc.)	Often requires documentation
More informal in tone, language, and subject matter	More formal in tone, language, and topic selection

LESSON 3: WHAT DO STUDENTS REALLY BELIEVE?

Personal essays can be difficult—asking students to start with the abstract and make it tangible. Students raised on personal narratives and even memoir will still struggle with this hardest of personal writing forms. This makes pre-writing especially critical. The activities below represent a variety of pre-writing approaches to stimulate your students to reflect before trying to organize their thinking in any kind of formal way.

1. Belief Consensus

- Have students complete the *What Do You Think?* exercise on the following page.
- Then ask them to assemble in groups of three to four.
- Groups should find one belief statement on which all members agree and record the common belief. (See “Show Me the Money,” attached.) Then each member of the group should tell a story (which everyone records) that shows the personal belief in action OR explains why the teller believes as (s)he does.
- Class debrief: Have each group choose a “best” story. “Bestness” should be measured by connection to belief—to share with entire class. Ask the class what they think the story is showing. See how close the match is. Does it meet the “bestness” criteria?
- Ask students to write in a Writer’s Notebook for around 10 minutes about their beliefs and the stories that illustrate them. They can use the belief they discussed with their group—adding, extending, embellishing—OR choose another from the list.

– OR – for a more kinesthetic approach:

2. Four Corners

- Label two corners of your classroom “Agree” and two corners “Disagree” with maximum capacities marked (e.g., “no more than nine people”).
- Then read off a belief from *What Do You Think* (or a list you’ve created yourself). If students agree with the statement, they should go to an “Agree” corner; if they disagree they should go to a “Disagree” corner.
- Students should write down the belief and then discuss it with the people in their corner, listening to stories that offer evidence of the belief in action or that explain why the storyteller believes the way (s)he does. Students should record stories and continue to interview each other until teacher calls time.
- Repeat this exercise with another belief.
- Ask students to select one of the statements that they felt strongly about and write about this belief in a Writer’s Notebook for 10 minutes.

– OR –

3. Seeing is Believing Poster

- After students complete *What Do You Think?*, have them partner up. Partners should complete a poster-size version of *Seeing Is Believing*, an exercise found on page 15.
- Have students go on a “Gallery Walk” to view other posters and see what their colleagues believe.
- Ask students to write in a Writer’s Notebooks for 10 minutes about their beliefs and the stories that illustrate them. They can use the belief they “posterized”—adding, extending, embellishing—OR another from the list.

What Do You Think?

In the space in front of each belief statement, write an “A” if you agree or a “D” if you disagree.

- _____ Life is fair.
- _____ Words can hurt.
- _____ What goes around comes around.
- _____ How you act in a crisis shows who you really are.
- _____ Love conquers all.
- _____ An eye for an eye...
- _____ People learn from their mistakes.
- _____ You can't depend on anyone else; you can only depend on yourself.
- _____ If you smile long enough, you become happy.
- _____ Miracles do happen.
- _____ There is one special person for everyone.
- _____ Money can't buy happiness.
- _____ Doing what's right doesn't just mean obeying the law.

Show Me the Money...or at Least the Story that Makes It Real

Choose a belief that is common to all group members. Record your common belief in the space below. Then each member of the group should tell a story that either shows the belief in action or explains why the storyteller believes what (s)he does.

Belief Statement: _____

Story from _____

Group member name

Story from _____

Group member name

Story from _____

Group member name

Story from _____

Group member name

Seeing Is Believing

Belief is more than just saying what you think. It's about acting in a way that supports the belief. Choose a statement from *What Do You Think?* and, with a partner, come up with as many stories, images, and words that communicate that belief. Create a large poster that will help other people understand what this belief means through your eyes.

Include things like:

Synonyms (words and phrases that mean the same thing as the belief statement) OR words/phrases associated with this concept. <i>Example: Life is fair.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Even-steven</i>• <i>You get out of it as much as you put into it</i>• <i>You get what you deserve</i>	Pictures/images of belief in action—pictures may be narrative or metaphoric.	Stories that show what belief means.
Clearing up misconceptions about this belief—i.e., <i>Love conquers all does not mean that you shouldn't give your daughter an allowance OR a really nice gift for no reason at all</i>	Rules that govern this belief—i.e., <i>To learn from your mistakes:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>You need to know when you've made a mistake.</i>• <i>You need to stifle all defensive impulses, etc</i>	A Top Five list, for example: <i>Top Five Daily Miracles</i> <i>5. I get up every day.</i> <i>4. Algebra II is 1st period so by the time I wake up it's over.</i> <i>3. There's such a thing as Fruit Loops.</i> <i>2. We beat _____ HS in football.</i> <i>1. Chocolate.</i>

Posters should be legible, labeled with belief statement, visual, and attractive and should fill the entire space.

LESSON 4: HOW DO STUDENTS GET OFF TO A GREAT START?

A Writer's Notebook is a non-threatening way to nudge students' critical thinking about what really matters most to them. Choose from among the Personal Writing Prompts below or offer your students other prompts and invite them to reflect for 10 minutes in their Writer's Notebook.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Everyone has problems or challenges to overcome in life. What has been the most challenging or rewarding moment in your life?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have you ever been in a situation when you didn't quite have the courage to take action in a situation when you felt you should?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Did you ever have to confront someone very different from you? If so, what happened? What did you learn?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have you ever had a "do something" moment—a time when you realized you had to take action in order to make a change happen?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have you ever been disappointed because someone made you a promise that they failed to keep? Or have you broken a promise that you made to someone else?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• As a teenager, what do you believe are the most important "rules to live by"? When did you learn those "rules," and who taught you?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can you think of someone who has taught you a valuable lesson about life? Can you remember the exact moment when that lesson occurred?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We all tend to judge people by their appearances, even though looks can be deceiving. Have you ever prejudged someone incorrectly based on appearances, or has someone ever prejudged you unfairly based on how you look?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Finish this sentence: "If there's one thing I've learned about life, it is..."	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have you ever changed your mind about something that you were previously certain about?

Composing an Effective Lead

Sometimes getting started is the hardest part for writers. Share the following tips on how to compose effective leads for the personal essay. While it is important to immerse students in both listening and reading of personal essays so that they will understand the genre, it may actually be beneficial to postpone the writing of the lead itself until AFTER a student has written the body of the essay. It is hard to introduce someone or something until AFTER you really know the body of the essay well!

1. Listen to the reading of a personal essay on a This I Believe CD (or play the streaming audio version off the website www.thisibelieve.org) and/or read several copies of This I Believe essays available on the website.
 - Ask writers to listen or look carefully for what makes an effective (or ineffective) lead to a personal essay.
 - Read a This I Believe essay or an essay of your own choosing. What strategy has the author used to grab your interest as a reader and make you want to continue reading?
2. Explain to writers that they will need a powerful hook to get any reader's attention. The lead is the doorway through which a writer welcomes and orients readers to the idea. **Urge writers to avoid beginning an essay with the statement "This I Believe."** Encourage them instead to try using at least two of the following strategies as more effective leads. Then they can choose the better opening with the help of a peer or teacher listener. If students are allowed to compose just one lead, they will not see or hear the impact that a different strategy can make on their writing.
 - **Question**: "When was the last time you went without a meal?"
 - **Quotation**: (from someone famous or from someone significant in your life)
"Be careful were the last words my father said to me each time I left the house."
 - **Strong statement** (that your essay will either support or dispute)
"If you eat enough cabbage, you'll never get cancer."
 - **Metaphor**: "The starlings in my back garden are the small boys in the playground, impressing each other with their new-found swear words. The crows all belong to the same biker gang. You need to know their secret sign to join their club."
 - **Description** (of a person or setting): "Michael once mowed the lawns around Municipal Hall wearing a frilly apron, high heels, and nylons, with a pillow stuffed under his sweater so he looked pregnant. And it wasn't even Halloween."

Tips To Add Audience Appeal To Personal Essays

1. Be sure your essay is about something you care strongly enough about to elaborate and wax eloquent or passionate about it. Readers want to know what *you* know, feel what *you* feel, and understand exactly where *you* are coming from.
2. While the idea for the essay must be personal, make the frame big enough to allow your reader to find parallels between your experience and theirs. Give readers the opportunity to say, “Ah! Yes, I’ve never been there or done that, but I can relate to what the author is talking about.” Even if readers have not been on a mission trip to Africa, the effective writer must draw in an audience to show a more universal implication of a very personal experience or belief.
3. If you are writing about a small personal occurrence, put your idea in a context that gives the reader insight to both the small moment and the wider perspective. Think of your essay as a camera lens. You might start by describing a fine detail (a specific moment in the narrative), then opens up the lens to take in the wide view (the general/global backdrop), then close the piece by narrowing back to the fine detail.
4. Use details to draw the reader in. Be specific and avoid using abstract expressions and phrases such as “the best day of my life” or “I’d never known greater grief” to describe emotions of love or loss. Make the emotions real and immediate by noting specifics and details that draw the reader into your own personal experience.
5. Employ all the senses to convey your ideas to the reader: sight, sound, taste, touch, and hearing.
6. Make sure that beyond all the idea development, your readers can summarize the main idea that *you* believe. You should not have to hit the readers over the head with a summary statement such as “What I am trying to say...” or “What I really mean is...” In fact, such a closing is almost insulting or an indication that you fear you have danced around the belief without making it crystal clear. You must aim to leave the readers clear and satisfied—whether they agree with what you believe or not. Sometimes a brief echo of the opening is the most satisfying clincher to bring a personal essay full circle.

Be sure your essay tells a story about you and how one of your personal beliefs was formed.

LESSON 5: HOW DO I SUPPORT MY PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY?

Make an overhead or write dramatically on the board the six letters below. Each one stands for a simple technique that students can use to support their personal beliefs (and in transactive/on-demand writing as well). The strategies below have been adapted from writing guru Barry Lane for use in This I Believe compositions.

Explain the term that goes with each letter. Challenge students to think of specific examples from the essays that they have read as part of this unit.

D Dialogue – “If you can’t say something good, don’t say anything at all,” my mother warned me throughout my childhood.

R Rhetorical Question – “When you are eighty years old, what will you regret that you didn’t do?” I asked myself.

A Anecdote – “When I was about 10 years old, I was walking down the street with my mother. She stopped to speak to Mr. Lee. I was busy trying to bulls-eye the “O” in the stop sign with a rock. I knew I could see Mr. Lee any old time around the neighborhood, so I didn’t pay any attention to him. After we passed Mr. Lee my mother stopped me and said something that has stuck with me from that day until now. She said, “You let that be the last time you ever walk by somebody and not open up your mouth to speak, because even a dog can wag its tail when it passes you on the street.” That phrase sounds simple but it’s been a guidepost for me and the foundation of who I am.”

P Personal Experience – “My belief was formed eighteen years ago as a five-year-old kid during my first of many seasons of Little League baseball.”

E Example – “I believe in my dog. I believe in the way he lives his life, and I try to emulate him. I strive to gain his level of happiness in the simplest of things. Like the way he approaches each meal with endless appreciation and even joy.”

S Statistic – “At the age of only six and a half, my parents were told that I had only a 50 percent chance for survival. To my father, that meant I might die. But to my mother, that meant I had half a chance to live. My parents always tell this story to show me that everything in life depends on how you look at it.”

ATTACHMENTS

Sample This I Believe Essays

This I Believe Essay-Writing Guidelines

This I Believe Essay-Submission Procedures



Tomorrow Will Be a Better Day

Josh Rittenberg

I'm 16. On a recent night, while I was busy thinking about important social issues, like what to do over the weekend and who to do it with, I overheard my parents talking about my future. My dad was upset—not the usual stuff that he and Mom and, I guess, a lot of parents worry about like which college I'm going to, how far away it is from home, and how much it's going to cost. Instead, he was upset about the world his generation is turning over to mine, a world he fears has a dark and difficult future—if it has a future at all. He sounded like this:

“There will be a pandemic that kills millions, a devastating energy crisis, a horrible worldwide depression, and a nuclear explosion set off in anger.”

As I lay on the living room couch, eavesdropping on their conversation, starting to worry about the future my father was describing, I found myself looking at some old family photos. There was a picture of my grandfather in his Citadel uniform. He was a member of the class of 1942, the war class. Next to his picture were photos of my great-grandparents, Ellis Island immigrants. Seeing those pictures made feel a lot better. I believe tomorrow will be better than today—that the world my generation grows into is going to get better, not worse. Those pictures helped me understand why.

I considered some of the awful things my grandparents and great-grandparents had seen in their lifetimes: two world wars, killer flu, segregation, a nuclear bomb. But they saw other things, too, better things: the end of two world wars, the polio vaccine, passage of the civil rights laws. They even saw the Red Sox win the World Series—twice.

I believe that my generation will see better things, too—that we will witness the time when AIDS is cured and cancer is defeated; when the Middle East will find peace and Africa grain, and the Cubs win the World Series—probably, only once. I will see things as inconceivable to me today as a moon shot was to my grandfather when he was 16, or the Internet to my father when he was 16.

Ever since I was a little kid, whenever I've had a lousy day, my dad would put his arm around me and promise me that “tomorrow will be a better day.” I challenged my father once, “How do you know that?” He said, “I just do.” I believed him. My great-grandparents believed that, and my grandparents, and so do I.

As I listened to my Dad talking that night, so worried about what the future holds for me and my generation, I wanted to put my arm around him, and tell him what he always told me, “Don't worry Dad, tomorrow will be a better day.” This, I believe.



Finding the Flexibility to Survive

Brighton Earley

Every Friday night the cashier at the Chevron gas station food mart on Eagle Rock Boulevard and Avenue 40 offers us a discount on all the leftover apples and bananas. To ensure the best selection possible, my mother and I pile into our 20-year-old car and pull up to the food mart at 5 p.m. on the dot, ready to get our share of slightly overripe fruits.

Before the times of the Chevron food mart, there were the times of the calculator. My mother would carefully prop it up in the car's child seat and frown as she entered each price. Since the first days of the calculator's appearance, the worry lines in my mother's face have only grown deeper. Today, they are a permanent fixture.

Chevron shopping started like this: One day my mother suddenly realized that she had maxed out almost every credit card, and we needed groceries for the week. The only credit card she hadn't maxed out was the Chevron card and the station on Eagle Rock Boulevard has a pretty big mart attached to it.

Since our first visit there, I've learned to believe in flexibility. In my life, it has become necessary to bend the idea of grocery shopping. My mother and I can no longer shop at real grocery stores, but we still get the necessities.

Grocery shopping at Chevron has its drawbacks. The worst is when we have so many items that it takes the checker what seems like hours to ring up everything. A line of anxious customers forms behind us. It's that line that hurts the most—the way they look at us. My mother never notices—or maybe she pretends not to.

I never need to be asked to help the checker bag all the items. No one wants to get out of there faster than I do. I'm embarrassed to shop there, and I'm deathly afraid of running into someone I know. I once expressed my fear of being seen shopping at Chevron to my mother and her eyes shone with disappointment. I know that I hurt her feelings when I try to evade our weekly shopping trips.

And that is why I hold on to the idea of flexibility so tightly. I believe that being flexible keeps me going—keeps me from being ashamed of the way my family is different from other families. Whenever I feel the heat rise to my face, I remind myself that grocery shopping at a gas station is just a twist on the normal kind of grocery shopping. I remind myself that we won't always have to shop at Chevron—that just because at this point in my life I am struggling does not mean that I will always struggle. My belief in flexibility helps me get through the difficult times because I know that no matter what happens, my mother and I will always figure out a way to survive.



We Are Each Other's Business

Eboo Patel

I am an American Muslim. I believe in pluralism. In the Holy Quran, God tells us, “I created you into diverse nations and tribes that you may come to know one another.” I believe America is humanity’s best opportunity to make God’s wish that we come to know one another a reality.

In my office hangs Norman Rockwell’s illustration Freedom of Worship. A Muslim holding a Quran in his hands stands near a Catholic woman fingering her rosary. Other figures have their hands folded in prayer and their eyes filled with piety. They stand shoulder-to-shoulder facing the same direction, comfortable with the presence of one another and yet apart. It is a vivid depiction of a group living in peace with its diversity, yet not exploring it.

We live in a world where the forces that seek to divide us are strong. To overcome them, we must do more than simply stand next to one another in silence.

I attended high school in the western suburbs of Chicago. The group I ate lunch with included a Jew, a Mormon, a Hindu, a Catholic, and a Lutheran. We were all devout to a degree, but we almost never talked about religion. Somebody would announce at the table that they couldn’t eat a certain kind of food, or any food at all, for a period of time. We all knew religion hovered behind this, but nobody ever offered any explanation deeper than “my mom said,” and nobody ever asked for one.

A few years after we graduated, my Jewish friend from the lunchroom reminded me of an experience we both wish had never happened. A group of thugs in our high school had taken to scrawling anti-Semitic slurs on classroom desks and shouting them in the hallway. I did not confront them. I did not comfort my Jewish friend. Instead I averted my eyes from their bigotry, and I avoided my friend because I couldn’t stand to face him.

My friend told me he feared coming to school those days, and he felt abandoned as he watched his close friends do nothing. Hearing him tell me of his suffering and my complicity is the single most humiliating experience of my life.

My friend needed more than my silent presence at the lunch table. I realize now that to believe in pluralism means I need the courage to act on it. Action is what separates a belief from an opinion. Beliefs are imprinted through actions.

In the words of the great American poet Gwendolyn Brooks: “We are each other’s business; we are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

I cannot go back in time and take away the suffering of my Jewish friend, but through action I can prevent it from happening to others.



Inner Strength from Desperate Times

Jake Hovenden

Only a handful of people know this about me, but five years ago my father died of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis or ALS. This is a fatal disease that literally eats away at a person's muscles until they cannot walk, talk, or even breathe. It was a life changing experience, but I can't really say that I developed any defining beliefs from it. Rather, the whole thing just really confused me on what to believe.

But, this essay is not about my experience with my father's passing. It's about my stepmother. I believe in inner strength. It was my stepmother, Janey Hovenden, who really had the hardest time when my father was suffering from ALS. For three years she juggled work, my dad and me with virtually no breaks, but she never gave up. Every day, right after she got home from work, she would cook dinner for us. She'd have to feed my father because ALS made it so he was incapable of feeding himself. During the nights my stepmother would stay up with my dad to make sure he wouldn't suffocate while he slept. She'd stay up and comfort him, even though she had to work early the next morning. Janey even fought past her fear of needles in order to treat my dad at home because the last thing he wanted was to lie in a hospital bed during his final days.

My dad was a proud man and didn't want people to see him when he was wasting away, but Janey went against his wishes and invited old friends over to say their final goodbyes. Although he didn't want to admit it my dad cherished every visit.

I really had not appreciated what my stepmother had done before, but looking back I realize how much she did for my dad. She kept him alive as long as she could, almost single-handedly. Today Janey is doing well and still taking care of me, just as well as she took care of me and my dad when he was sick. Before my dad passed-on he told Janey that she would have to be my father figure, and though she isn't my dad, she is the next best thing. She jokes around with me about it. Even though I live mostly with my Mom, I still get to see Janey once a week and she has helped me immensely in getting through this and I think I help her, too. She says I remind her of Dad, and spending time with me and cooking dinner for me helps her remember.

I believe that inner strength emerges when times are desperate. I believe people sometimes refuse to give up, and they help others no matter the personal cost. My stepmother proved that to me.



Returning to What's Natural

Amelia Baxter-Stoltzfus

I believe in semi-permanent hair dye: The kind that lets you have a few wacky purple-headed weeks in the depressing months of winter term, but leaves you plain and brunette again in time for graduation pictures. The kind that lets you be whoever you want without letting go of how you got there. The kind that lets you embrace those internal contradictions that make up an entire, oxymoronic, complex, complete human being. I believe in hypocrisy, just a little.

Semi-permanent hair dye is about finding security within unlimited freedom. It's about recognizing what I have in my life and holding on to it, even if only at the base of a follicle, because I also believe in roots.

My mother always tells me that the hair color you're born with is the one that looks the best on you, and I want to make sure that there's something inside of me that's always going to be worth returning to. Maybe the house I lived in with my parents will never be home for me again. Maybe I'll fall out of touch with people I thought I was pretty close to in high school. Maybe I'll hate the way a darker brown washes me out. But I'll know that in 20 to 26 washes, I'll come back to something that I've had naturally forever, and I'll know it looks pretty good.

Here's where the hypocrisy comes in. Every time you get away from home, thinking how you're going to reinvent yourself, you end up hanging on to the things about yourself that are the most familiar. Feeling safe isn't about setting limits on the outside. It's about hanging on for dear life to what's on the inside, no matter how your context changes. Because, honestly, you'll never know whether you look fantastic as a redhead unless you've tried. What you will know is that you have brown to return to, when you're ready.

I've just moved into my first apartment all on my own, and New Jersey has never felt so far away. But this new independence could only come from dependence, from knowing that there are unshakable things in my life that have made me ready to face all the Big Bads in the world. We can't be toddlers or teenagers forever, and there's too much out there to experience to make me want to dwell too much in the past. So I do believe in permanent change; just not for my hair.



This I Believe Essay-Writing Guidelines

We invite you to contribute to this project by writing and submitting your own statement of personal belief. We understand how challenging this is—it requires intense self-examination, and no one else can do it for you. To guide you through this process, we offer these suggestions:

Tell a story about you: Be specific. Tell the story of events in your life that have helped shape your own personal philosophy. Consider moments when belief was formed or tested or changed. Think of your own experience, and tell of the things you know that no one else does. Your story need not be heart-warming or gut-wrenching—it can even be funny—but it should be *real*. Make sure your story ties to the essence of your daily life philosophy and the shaping of your own personal beliefs.

Be brief: Your statement should be between 350 and 500 words. That’s about three minutes when read aloud at your natural pace.

Name your belief: If you can’t name it in a sentence or two, your essay might not be about belief. Also, rather than writing a list, consider focusing on a core belief, telling the story of why this belief is important to you.

Be positive: Write about what you *do* believe, not what you *don’t* believe. Avoid speaking in the editorial “we.” Avoid statements of religious dogma, preaching, or editorializing. Avoid writing an opinion piece about civic or political issues.

Be personal: Make your essay about you; speak in the first person. Write in words and phrases that are comfortable for you to speak. We recommend you read your essay aloud to yourself several times, and each time edit it and simplify it until you find the words, tone, and story that truly echo your belief and the way you speak.

When you have finished the final draft of your This I Believe essay, we encourage you to share your essay with others—classmates, friends, parents, and grandparents. Ask them to write their own This I Believe essays. See if you learn something new about someone close to you.

Please also consider submitting your essay to the online This I Believe Essay Collection, where more than 100,000 people have shared essays about the stories of their beliefs. If you are under the age of 18, you may submit your essay only with a parent’s or guardian’s permission.

To submit your completed essay to This I Believe, visit the website: www.thisibelieve.org.



This I Believe Essay Submission Procedures

We encourage everyone—of all ages and all walks of life—to submit their essays to the online This I Believe Essay Collection. This I Believe is not a contest, but a community conversation so that we may all develop respect for each other's beliefs, including those with which we may disagree.

All essays that fit within the This I Believe Essay-Writing Guidelines (see previous page) will be published on our website. Essays that are not about personal belief will not be posted on our website. Editorial decisions are at the sole discretion of This I Believe, Inc.

We encourage every writer to proofread his or her essay several times before submitting it, as This I Believe, Inc., does not accept corrections or changes after receiving an essay.

IMPORTANT: Please encourage students 18 and older to submit essays to the This I Believe website; however, we caution the exercise of making essay submission mandatory for a grade.

IMPORTANT: For students under the age of 18, parents or guardians of said minors must be involved in the actual submission process online. Please direct parents to our website if they wish to submit their child's essay to our online Essay Collection.

IMPORTANT: This I Believe, Inc., is no longer accepting essays by U.S. mail. All essays should be submitted through the website at thisibelieve.org.

Essay submissions: www.thisibelieve.org

To submit an essay, click on the menu button “write,” then the drop-down window “submit your essay”