



*A national dialogue about
personal values and civic ideals*



Edward R. Murrow, the original host of *This I Believe*
with student essayist, Elizabeth Deutsch
Photo courtesy of Elizabeth D. Earle

SAMPLE HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CURRICULUM

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THIS I BELIEVE

Reading and Writing Lessons to Create an Effective Personal Essay

Introduction to the This I Believe Pilot Curriculum

From 1951-1955, 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. The first volume of *This I Believe* essays, published in 1952, sold 300,000 copies—more than any other book in the U. S. during that year except for the Bible. In fact, these Murrow broadcasts were so popular that curriculum was even developed to encourage American high school students to compose essays about their most significant personal beliefs.

Fifty years later, NPR and This I Believe, Inc., are again inviting Americans of all ages and all perspectives to examine their belief systems and then write a 400-500 word personal essay.

In order to coordinate activities in the schools with the new NPR series, 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 new unit, teachers can guide students to produce 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.npr.org/ThisIBelieve.

These lessons were originally developed by Dottie Willis of the Jefferson County Public School System in Louisville, Kentucky as pilot drafts of a *This I Believe* curriculum for eventual use by other teachers and students across the nation. Your feedback on this unit—any additions, adaptations, suggestions for useful resources, etc.—will be welcomed for future use and revision.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: THIS I BELIEVE

Drafting a personal philosophy of life is difficult—even when writers have lived multiple decades like those who collaborated to design these literacy lessons. I encourage teachers to attempt this thought-provoking assignment along with your students to discover first-hand just how challenging this writing task really is!

I 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.

Dottie Willis, Jefferson County Public School Writing Specialist
and author of the *This I Believe* curriculum

Lesson 1: What is a Personal Essay?

1. A *This I Believe* essay is a personal essay. Show the graphic organizer for this lesson to help students understand basic differences between a personal essay, which is focused on a *belief or insight about life that is significant to the writer*, and the two other forms of personal writing: the personal narrative and the memoir.
 - A personal narrative is focused on a **significant event**.
 - A memoir is focused on a **significant relationship** 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 your own essay (see Lesson 7 for additional student essays) to demonstrate the characteristics of a Personal Narrative.
 - Ask a second class section to read “**My First Lifeline**” (below). Or, you may choose your own essay to demonstrate the characteristics of a Memoir.
 - Ask a third division of the class to read “**A Doubting, Questioning Mind**” (below). Or choose an essay that demonstrates the characteristics of a Personal Essay.
4. The 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** that are part of this lesson or offer your students other prompts and invite them to reflect for 10 minutes in their Writer’s Notebook.

****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 as 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- 1 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.

“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 biting 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 mumbo-jumbo!” 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.

A Doubting, Questioning Mind

Elizabeth Earle, 1954

This essay aired as a This I Believe segment circa 1954. Elizabeth was 16 years old at the time. Go to <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4538100> for more information about Elizabeth, and to hear the audio of both this essay and an essay she recently wrote as an adult.

At the age of sixteen, many of my friends have already chosen a religion to follow (usually that of their parents), and are bound to it by many ties. I am still "freelancing" in religion, searching for beliefs to guide me when I am an adult. I fear I shall always be searching, never attaining ultimate satisfaction, for I possess that blessing and curse -- a doubting, questioning mind.

At present, my doubting spirit has found comfort in certain ideas, gleaned from books and experience, to form a personal philosophy. I find that this philosophy, a code consisting of a few phrases, supplements, but does not replace, religion.

The one rule that could serve anyone in almost any situation is, "To see what must be done and not to do it, is a crime." Urged on by this, I volunteer for distasteful tasks or pick up scrap paper from the floor. I am no longer able to ignore duty without feeling guilty. This is "The still, small voice," to be sure, but sharpened by my own discernment of duty.

"The difficult we do at once, the impossible takes a little longer." This is the motto of a potential scientist, already struggling to unravel the mysteries of life. It rings with the optimism youth needs in order to stand up against trouble or failure.

Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan minister, resolved never to do anything out of revenge. I am a modern, a member of a church far removed from Puritanism, yet I have accepted this resolution. Since revenge and retaliation seem to have been accepted by nations today, I sometimes have difficulty reconciling my moral convictions with the tangled world being handed down to us by the adults. Apparently what I must do to make life more endurable is to follow my principles, with the hope that enough of this feeling will rub off on my associates to being a chain reaction.

To a thinking person, such resolutions are very valuable; nevertheless, they often leave a vacuum in the soul. Churches are trying to fill this vacuum, each by its own method. During this year, I have visited churches ranging from orthodoxy to extreme liberalism. In my search for a personal faith, I consider it my duty to expose myself to all forms of religion. Each church has left something within me - either a new concept of God and man, or an understanding and respect for those of other beliefs. I have found such experiences with other religions the best means for freeing myself from prejudices.

Through my visits, the reasoning of fundamentalists has become clearer to me, but I am still unable to accept it. I have a simple faith in the Deity and a hope that my attempts to live a decent life are pleasing to Him. If I were to discover that there is no afterlife, my motive for moral living would not be destroyed. I have enough of the philosopher in me to love righteousness for its own sake.

This is my youthful philosophy, a simple, liberal and optimistic feeling, though I fear I shall lose some of it as I become more adult. Already, the thought that the traditional thinkers might be right, after all, and I wrong, has made me waver. Still, these are my beliefs at sixteen. If I am mistaken, I am too young to realize my error. Sometimes, in a moment of mental despair, I think of the words, "God loves an honest doubter," and I am comforted.

PERSONAL WRITING PROMPTS FOR A WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

Let students choose one or more cards from this page as a prompt for an entry in their Writer's Notebook.

<p>1. Most of us have been in a situation where we made a promise that for one reason or another we were unable to keep.</p> <p>When were you disappointed because someone made you a promise that they failed to keep? Or when did you break a promise that you made to someone else?</p>	<p>4. We all tend to judge people by their appearances, even though looks can be deceiving.</p> <p>Have you ever prejudged someone incorrectly based on their appearance or has someone ever prejudged you unfairly based on how you look?</p>
<p>2. All of us are works in progress with a long way to go before we reach our full potential.</p> <p>In what skill or area are you still working to make progress?</p>	<p>5. Everyone has problems or challenges to overcome.</p> <p>What obstacles are you proud to have faced and conquered?</p>
<p>3. Our society uses the word <i>hero</i> in many different ways?</p> <p>How do you define <i>hero</i>, and who is a hero in your life?</p>	<p>6. There is a famous old adage: "To err is human; to forgive divine."</p> <p>When did you feel divine because you were able to forgive someone for their mistake? When did someone act divine by forgiving you when you were wrong?</p>

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**. This chart (attached) 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 Lesson 7 for sample student essays, or visit www.npr.org/thisibelieve 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 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 each student to summarize the article for assigned partner 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.
 - Using S-R-E, call on students to explain their answers by giving evidence from each article to support their reasons for the differences.

PERSONAL ESSAY VS. TRANSACTIVE WRITING

Personal Essay	Transactive Writing
Communicates the significance of a central idea or insight that has a deep personal meaning to the writer	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 more reflective, 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 based upon the writer's personal experiences or anecdotes	Development of the piece is based upon research from credible sources
Written in first person; 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	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 are 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 *What Do You Think?*
 1. Then ask them to assemble in groups of 3-4.
 - 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 class what they think story is showing. See how close the match is. Does it meet the “bestness” criteria?
 - Ask students to write in Writer’s Notebook for around 10 minutes about their beliefs and 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 2 corners of your classroom “Agree” and 2 corners “Disagree” with maximum capacities (i.e. no more than 9 people) marked.
- 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 chat it up with the people in their corner, listening to stories that offer evidence of the belief in action or that explain why the story-teller 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 their Writer’s Notebook for 10 minutes.

OR

- After students complete *What Do You Think?* Have them partner up. Partners should complete a poster-size version of *Seeing Is Believing*.
- Have students go on a Gallery Walk to see what their colleagues believe.
- Ask students to write in Writer’s Notebook 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's fair.
- _____ Words can hurt.
- _____ Police are your friends.
- _____ 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.
- _____ Killing is wrong.
- _____ Doing what's right means 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 explain why the story-teller believes what (s)he does.

Belief Statement: _____

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 Believe?* and, with a partner, come up with as many stories, images, and words that communicate that belief as you can. Create a (larger-than-life) poster that will help other people understand what this belief means through your eyes.

Include things like:

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

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

Lesson 4: What Quotations Guide Students' Lives?

The rules that govern students' lives are often the same rules taught by parents and respected role models. Sometimes the 'tapes' that play in students' brains are memories of familiar quotations, words programmed into their subconscious minds through parental repetition and/or personal reading. To help seniors compose a clear statement about the foundation of their individual philosophy, review and discuss wise words that they have heard spoken by others or encountered in their reading.

1. Assign students to interview a parent or role model who has made a lasting influence upon their way of thinking and acting. Seniors might begin this interview with this open-ended question: "As the time grows near for me to leave home, what is the most important message or belief that you hope I will take with me and remember throughout my entire life?"
 - Advise students to listen carefully and take clear notes on what this adult says, just like a reporter investigating a news story.
 - Remind students to ask probing questions in this interview so that they will understand exactly why the adult has chose this specific message and how the adult has tried to follow this personal advice in his or her own life.
 - During class the following day, poll students to see what common wisdom they have heard from the adults in their lives.
2. Another opportunity to explore belief statements is to select several quotations such as the pages included with this lesson.
 - Ask students to scan these quotations, looking for three different sayings that they themselves have discovered to be true in their own life experiences.
 - Require students to write a 10-minute entry in the Writer's Notebook about on e of these meaningful quotations and be prepared to share their response with a small group of other students.
 - Divide the class into groups of four. Ask students to read all other reflections silently and to use a post it note to ask each writer one probing question about the quotation selected.
 - The quotation that the senior selected or one that the student finds significant to a classmate may spark the inspiration for a compelling personal essay.
3. Sometimes it is easier for a writer to identify what (s)he has learned about life than to put into words a coherent statement that communicates exactly what the writer believes.
 - Tell students to read **Things I Have Learned About Life** and **The Top Ten Things I Have Learned from Charlie Brown**.
 - Challenge students to write one significant learning of their own on a sentence strip. Publish these by displaying sentence strips on a bulletin board.

Cool Quotes for Teens

Each of the following adages appears in a text called Teen Quotes. They are beliefs of both famous and not so famous individuals. To which quotation(s) below can you make a text-to-self connection based on your own life experiences?

1. The good or ill of a man lies within his own will. – Epictetus
2. The greatest and most important problems in life are all in a certain sense insoluble. They can never be solved, but only outgrown. – Carl Jung
3. The greatest thing about man is his ability to transcend himself, his ancestry and his environment and to become what he dreams of being. – Tully C. Knoles
4. The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts... take care that you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and reasonable nature. – Marcus Aurelius
5. The life given us by nature is short, but the memory of a life well spent is eternal. – Cicero
6. The love we give away is the only love we keep. – Elbert Hubbard
7. The measure of success is not whether you have a tough problem to deal with, but whether it is the same problem you had last year. – John Foster Dulles
8. The miracle is not to fly in the air, or to walk on the water; but to walk on the earth.
– Chinese Proverb
9. The more you lose yourself in something bigger than yourself, the more energy you will have. – Norman Vincent Peale
10. The only discipline that lasts is self-discipline. -Bum Phillips

COACHING QUOTES

Sometimes personal essays are actually inspired by a belief statement or quotation from someone famous that the writer respects. Do any quotations below ring true with what you yourself believe? If so, one of these quotations might offer a thesis around which you can frame a personal essay about an insight that has made a real difference in your own life.

1. "I have found that being honest is the best technique I can use. Right up front, tell people what you're trying to accomplish, and what you're willing to sacrifice to accomplish it."
-Lee Iococca
2. "I know you've heard it a thousand times before. But it's true--hard work pays off. If you want to be good, you have to practice, practice, practice. If you don't love something, then don't do it." - Ray Bradbury
3. "If you're not making mistakes, then you're not doing anything. I'm positive that a doer makes mistakes." - John Wooden
4. "It is a paradoxical but profoundly true and important principle of life that the most likely way to reach a goal is to be aiming not at that goal itself but at some more ambitious goal beyond it." - Arnold Toynbee
5. "I don't wait for moods. You accomplish nothing if you do that. Your mind must know it has got to get down to earth." - Pearl Buck
6. "I don't look to jump over 7-foot bars. I look around for 1-foot bars that I can step over."
- Warren Buffett
7. "If you deliberately plan on being less than you are capable of being, then I warn you that you'll be unhappy for the rest of your life." - Abraham Maslow
8. "If you don't quit, and don't cheat, and don't run home when trouble arrives, you can only win." - Shelley Long
9. "Success in golf depends less on strength of body than upon strength of mind and character."
- Arnold Palmer
10. "People of mediocre ability sometimes achieve outstanding success because they don't know when to quit. Most men succeed because they are determined to." - George Allen

Beliefs of John Wooden (Woodenisms)

Sometimes personal essays are actually inspired by a belief statement or quotation from someone famous that the writer respects. Do any quotations below from the famous UCLA basketball coach ring true with what you yourself believe? If so, one of these quotations might offer a thesis around which you can frame a personal essay about an insight that has made a real difference in your own life.

A man may make mistakes, but he isn't a failure until he starts blaming someone else

Ability may get you to the top, but it takes character to keep you there

The main ingredient of stardom is the rest of the team

Young people need models not critics

Talent is God given; be humble

Fame is man given; be thankful

Conceit is self-given; be careful

The journey is greater than the inn

Learn as if you were to live forever

Live as if you were to die tomorrow

The true athlete should have character

Not be a character

Do not let what you CANNOT do interfere with what you CAN do

Be more concerned with your character than with your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are

Things turn out best for those who make the best of the way things turn out

THINGS I'VE LEARNED.....

Personal Essays are based on ideas – insights we've learned based on your life experiences. Read the insights expressed by others, and then compose a sentence that expresses one thing you've learned about life.

1. I've learned that I like my teacher because she cries when we sing "Silent Night" ... Age 6
2. I've learned that when I wave to people in the country, they stop what they are doing and wave back. Age 9
3. I've learned that if you want to cheer yourself up, you should try cheering someone else up. Age 14
4. I've learned that although it's hard to admit it, I'm secretly glad my parents are strict with me. Age 15
5. I've learned that if someone says something unkind about me, I must live so that no one will believe it. Age 39
6. I've learned that there are people who love you dearly but just don't know how to show it. Age 42
7. I've learned that you can make some one's day by simply sending them a little note. Age 44
8. I've learned that the greater a person's sense of guilt, the greater his or her need to cast blame on others. Age 46
9. I've learned that no matter what happens, or how bad it seems today, life does go on, and it will be better tomorrow. Age 48
10. I've learned that regardless of your relationship with your parents, you miss them terribly after they die. Age 53
11. I've learned that making a living is not the same thing as making a life. Age 58
12. I've learned that life sometimes gives you a second chance. Age 62
13. I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catchers mitt on both hands. You need to be able to throw something back. Age 64
14. I've learned that whenever I decide something with kindness, I usually make the right decision. Age 66

15. I've learned that it pays to believe in miracles. And to tell the truth, I've seen several.
Age 75

16. I've learned that even when I have pains, I don't have to be one. Age 82

17. I've learned that every day you should reach out and touch someone. People love that human touch – holding hands, a warm hug or just a friendly pat on the back. Age 85

18. I've learned that I sill have a lot to learn. Age 92

<http://halife.com/halife/thingslearned.html>

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THE TOP 10 LESSONS I LEARNED FROM CHARLIE BROWN

by Jim Allen

For 50 years the daily comic strip “Peanuts” entertained millions of readers. Every day, the adventures of Charlie Brown, Snoopy, Linus and the whole gang provided many laugh-out-loud moments while at the same time offering a daily inspiration and lessons on life. I remember the many lessons they taught me....

1. It’s okay to be afraid...just don’t let your fears control you.

Charlie Brown often sat in bed and spoke of his fears, but no matter how scared he was, he always did the things he wanted to do.

2. Persistence wins out.

Charlie Brown often lost, failed at much, but he never gave up. Even though he knew Lucy was going to pull the football away before he could kick it...Even though he knew the tree was going to eat his kite...Even though he knew his team would lose the ball game, he kept on trying.

3. It’s what you think of yourself that matters most.

Linus carried a security blanket for years and his friends laughed at him. They also laughed at him because he believed in the ‘Great Pumpkin.’

Pigpen was a walking cloud of dust and dirt and was often regarded unkindly. Both characters, however, were always proud of themselves and believed they were as good as anybody else—and they were right.

4. Sometimes you need to talk.

One thing the ‘Peanuts’ gang understood was the importance of talking things out. Whether leaning up against Schroeder’s piano or atop the brick wall, they always had someplace to discuss what was of concern to them.

5. Sometimes you need to listen.

Even crabby, self-indulged Lucy knew the importance of listening. She started the famous ‘Psychiatry Booth’ where any and all could come and be heard.

6. Do what you love to do.

Through all their adventures, Schroeder remained constant in his appreciation of Beethoven and his love of playing the piano. He loved to play piano and that’s what he did, regardless of the circumstances. Charlie Brown flew his kite, played baseball and football, not just to win (he knew he wouldn’t), but because he loved to do those things.

7. It’s important to have friends that care.

The ‘Peanuts’ gang was made up of individual characters, each with their own foibles and talents, but through it all they were always there for each other.

8. Big dreams lead to big things!

Snoopy was the biggest dreamer of them all, but his wild imagination often led to even wilder, more fantastic adventures in real life. Snoopy knew that you must have a big dream if you are going to lead a big life.

9. Action creates reality.

As Charlie Brown was reminded time and again after prodding from Linus: it takes action to bring about change. Though he often failed, Chuck took action quite regularly....and every now and again things would go his way.

10. Laugh every day!

While the kids themselves may not have seen the humor in the things they did, Schulz made sure that *we* did. Life is only as serious or as humorous as YOU make it....Lighten up. Go play softball. Fly a kite. Dance with your dog. Smile....it makes people wonder what you're up to.

<http://halife.com/halife/charliebrow.html>

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Lesson 5: How Do Students Get Off to a Great Start?

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.npr.org/thisibelieve) and/or read several copies of *This I Believe* essays that were actually published in the 1952 text.
 - 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 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're 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 open 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 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.

Lesson 6: How Do I Support My Personal Philosophy?

Make an overhead or write dramatically on the chalkboard 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?”

A Anecdote

P Personal Experience

E Example

S Statistic

Lesson 7: Sample Essays

This section is currently under development. More essays will be added in subsequent editions of the curriculum.

Olivia Price
Louisville, KY

Bond Buddy

I had never been a believer in love at first sight. My father claims he has adored my mother since the day he first set eyes on her – when he was in the sixth grade. He used to smile and shake his head when I rolled my eyes at his fanciful account. However, I now have a reason to agree with his point of view. His name is Wesas.

I hadn't really known what to expect from Africa. All of my suppositions were based on National Geographic and "The Lion King," both of which, I later decided, portray merely a stereotype of the continent I grew to love. Unadorned and unembellished are the most precise terms I can employ when describing the country that was my home for the summer of 2003: Zambia. More visible than the landscape, however, was the distinction of the primitive lifestyle in which these people existed. The lack of electricity and running water was fundamental, yet profound. It surprised and delighted me that women actually transported water from its source to their homes via jugs on their heads. Water could come from anywhere: a well, a stream, a lake, a pump.

My first contact with real Africans was in the village of Lufwanyama in the bush of Zambia, hours away from anything that even remotely resembled a town. Children welcomed us first, undersized boys and girls with dark and beautiful eyes. Many of them had never seen white people before.

I was taken with their gentle voices, leaning in to hear their names. They spoke with softness and rapidity, usually having to repeat themselves at least twice. I loved this departure from my inherent American volume. My first African friend, and best, was no different from all the nationals with whom I spoke.

My first task upon arrival in Lufy (a pet name for the village) was to set up my tent and organize the meager belongings I had brought inside. Once that was completed, I sat on a branch bench, observing the activity all around me. At home I always loved to people-watch, and this was one instance where home and Africa were the same. Kids seemed to swarm everywhere. They were running and playing tag, laughing at our strange pale skin and fine, light hair.

I went up behind one of the boys, unnoticed for a moment. When he saw me, I offered my hand. Looking up, he took it. After that glance at me, his eyes returned to the scene around us. He liked to people-watch too.

I bent down to ask the only question he could have answered. "What's your name?"

“Mgphtynkwz.”

“What was that? I’m sorry, didn’t catch it. What’s your name again?”

“Grebhtfdqsa.”

I sighed, wondering if he would let go of my hand after he figured out this white girl was too moronic to understand his name. But he held fast while I asked him a third time. This time, the reply was slightly more intelligible: “Mayename ees Wesas.”

“Wesas?” I confirmed, enjoying his giggle at my pronunciation. He repeated himself again, and then was resigned to having his foreigner speak her own version of a Bemba name. His hand never loosened, and I was thrilled.

That was about the only verbal communication that took place. My Bemba was virtually nonexistent, and he could not understand more than rudimentary English phrases. I later learned from the facilitator that he was eight years old, and an orphan. His parents had probably died of malaria or AIDS.

After that first day, we jumped rope, played tag, and simply sat together, glad for each other’s company. I held him in my arms and wondered how long it had been since someone had taken time simply to love this exquisite little boy.

If he was unhappy with the circumstances that had taken place in his life, he did not show it. He participated in African tug-of-war, shrieking with happiness, as I looked on. I worried for him, because of the nature of the game in Africa, extra ropes for games are not abundant. Therefore, to play tug-of-war, no ropes are used. Human bodies construct the chains, with each person holding on for dear life to the person in front of him. Looking back on the scar I still have from this pastime, I remember how his brows furrowed in concentration, and how he laughed when his side was victorious.

Every day we stayed in Lufwanyama brought me closer to Wesas. He would stand by me while I read a book, or wait for my breaks from construction to come over and grab my hand again. I loved to examine the contrast in our hands. Mine were smooth, white, and relatively unsoiled (if I hadn’t been working with concrete). His were dark, faintly gnarled, and permanently dusty. When I would hold up our hands next to each other, he always seemed a bit self-conscious, as if he didn’t like the comparison. I was fascinated.

Time passed, as it tends to do. My team had to move onto the next village, and I hated the thought of no longer seeing my favorite orphan. My bond buddy.

I still get to see Wesas every day. A picture of the two of us the day I left serves as the background for my computer desktop. Wesas, I’m sure, has never seen a computer. Two lives so very different, and yet intricately intertwined. I thank God all the time that I was blessed enough to know him.

Wesas will never know the impact he has had on my life. I now know the purpose of my life, which is something incomprehensible for most high school seniors. As soon as I become a doctor, I'm going back to Africa. I want to work with the orphans. More than thirteen million children have been orphaned by AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa alone. An entire generation is growing up without parents. Which brings about another thing I plan on doing: I am going to adopt. I already support a Compassion International child named Naol. I wish I could fly him to the U.S. now to live with me. I made the decision to commit to Naol after ruling out the possibility of my parents actually adopting Wesas.

My life is forever changed from the time I spent in Africa. To echo David Livingstone, my heart belongs there. My future does as well.

On Passion

A few Saturdays ago I participated in a lively discussion over dinner with my family in Louisville about our version of "The Passion."

I'm not referring to Mel Gibson's film, but rather the plight in all of our lives to find our purpose and fulfill it passionately. In fairness to my family, we usually tackle lighter subjects over chicken and pasta. That night we sort of stumbled into the topic while discussing a sports column that appeared in The (Louisville) Courier-Journal.

The column was written about a childhood friend of mine with whom I graduated from high school. A few months back he switched his six-figure job as a Chicago attorney for an entry-level position doing something he always fantasized about -- coaching basketball.

Now, he's sleeping on an inflatable air mattress in a friend's apartment and earning \$25,000 as an assistant coach at a Manhattan high school. In the article he sounded as happy as ever. I haven't spoken with him in probably eight years, but I felt so happy for him and was impressed with his courageous leap into the unknown.

The article was sprinkled with uses of the word "passion" -- a word that echoed throughout my childhood like a tommy gun in the night. Looking back, I don't know if it was because of my Protestant upbringing or my parents' solid ethics, but I always knew that hard work and passion and purpose were supposed to be one in the same.

When I think of people who are passionate, I think about my friend the basketball coach, my mother the writing specialist for Jefferson County or the Owensboro police officer whom I spoke with last week. He voluntarily told me that he loved his job -- a job where he works weird hours and gets cussed at by strangers who sometimes try to fight him. That's passion.

Eventually, the dinner conversation turned to discussions about whether we were passionate about our jobs. This is where things became, well, impassioned.

At the table was an interesting mix of fine people from various professions including a teacher, a retired hospital chaplain and Presbyterian minister, a trial attorney, an environmental consultant, a music therapist and, last but not least, a dashing and hard-working newspaper reporter. (Needless to say, this is hardly the crowd that pulls a straight Republican ticket in November).

Some of us are passionate about our jobs, others love our jobs and some of us just like our jobs. The lovers and the likers were the four of us under 31. The passionate ones were the two in attendance who came of age during the Kennedy administration. Perhaps there is something explained by that generation gap.

It depends on which day someone would ask me, but most days I would say that I really like my job. I'm lucky to work with intelligent people who are knowledgeable about the community and genuinely care about it. And I'm not just saying that because my employers read this column.

But if someone asks me what it is that I'm passionate about I can think of an awful lot of things besides journalism. Often, the high point in my day is getting home from work, and it gets significantly better if I go to bed early with a good book.

At one point everyone at that dinner table had the sincere desire to change the world and the belief that it could actually be done. Now, I feel like I serve a good, and occasionally admirable, purpose as a reporter. However, I don't plan on changing Owensboro, much less the world.

Some might call that selfishness or traits of a conceited generation. I would disagree. I like to think that helping people and protecting people is a duty and obligation for those of us who are able. I truly enjoy the virtue of hard work and the rewarding feeling of productivity whether it is at the office or under the sun with a shovel.

It seems that most of the lessons I was raised to learn have stuck except for this passion thing. I do have passion when it comes to spending weekends in Louisville with my family and my girlfriend. I'm passionate about all things New Mexico or the annual weekend in March when my brother and I take a trip to watch basketball games. I have always been a passionate daydreamer. Am I passionate about my job? Hmm.

It took my awhile to realize that my inability to be passionate about my job was just reality and not some sort of personal failing. I'm content showing up each day for a job that I like, making the most of it and trying my hardest to do it well.

With a steady dose of daydreams, that will have to be good enough for now.

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Choosing Passion: Life is Exactly What You Make It

When I first heard the word "mediocre," my mom used it to describe her carrier as an oboist in the school orchestra. "I was mediocre," she said, "not bad but not passionate." *Mediocre*. I liked the word because it sounded like tapioca pudding or that vegetable they serve down south, but mostly I liked it because it sounded like me. Life wasn't bad, but I wasn't passionate about anything. I remember thinking to myself that it was too bad I was only mediocre at life because if I were passionate about something I might do some real good. But mediocre people never change the world. This was my philosophy for most of my growing up. People who were born in average homes, to average families had no hope or need of living anything more than an average, mediocre life. I enjoyed being mediocre. Until last month.

I went to my brother's Jr. High Orchestra concert, and in between the two nice but rather average orchestras, one girl performed Mendelssohn's Concerto in E Minor. I am a very mediocre musician, but I know what good music sounds like and I sat quietly, listening, completely entranced by this amazing musician. She was only in ninth grade, but already she was far ahead of most musicians my age. She stood in front of the auditorium, only half filled with parents and young children, as if she were playing in Carnegie hall. She had such a presence and played with such joy that when she finished the final crescendo I stood and applauded not only her masterful performance, but her passion for music.

"What kind of thoughts," I asked, turning to my friend, "run around in her head, because her brain obviously doesn't work like mine." As soon as I said it, I realized how stupid it sounded. Of course her brain worked like mine, talented or not we were both human beings. We were both born unable to speak or walk or change the world. We were perhaps raised in very different homes with different opportunities, but each day we both woke up on Mother Earth with the same choice; we each had to choose how we would change our world. I no longer choose to live a mediocre life. I have yet to sing on Broadway or change any national laws, but I choose to live life with passion. Every morning when I wake up, it's like being born all over again; I am an equal with every person, I have no reputation to uphold, no past to weigh me down. But if I used my first breath to curse today, then I am choosing to live a mediocre life. Instead, I am passionate about living every new moment. Passion is not given, like fairy's blessings, to baby princesses and future Olympiads. It's chosen by young violinists and mediocre girls like me.

Almost every day I encounter prejudice; usually it is subtle, but occasionally it is more obvious. I have endured judgmental stares, and I have overheard rude comments. I've felt uncomfortable in my own skin. I have sat by myself and questioned my sense of reality—could I be imagining these things? I've tried hard not to become angry and defensive, because I am not an angry person. I am a seventeen year old Caucasian girl living in America, and this I believe: One of the greatest tragedies of this country is that we have not fully embraced the idea of equality.

My perceived discrimination is not because I am a female. I am not disabled in any way, and I am not a minority. No, I am not looked down on because of race or sex or any feature with which I was born. I have been in an interracial relationship for over two and a half years. My boyfriend, Yusuf, and I are not blinded by the color of the other's skin. Sometimes I comment on the way our hands look when they are intertwined, pointing out the beauty in the contrast. We often discuss our backgrounds and share our cultures, careful not to let our differences become barriers in our relationship. Rising above outside judgment, however, has proven to be an ongoing and often difficult task.

When I started dating Yusuf, my parents worried. They are extremely open-minded individuals, and they have always taught me to accept all people without regard to race. They had, however, witnessed the baggage that comes with interracial relationships. My mother's best friend, Kay, and her white husband, Brad, had recently come back from a trip down South with stories of scornful looks and disrespectful words. Kay had even been accused of kidnapping, when a woman in a supermarket saw her light-skinned children and couldn't believe that they were the offspring of a black woman.

My mother did not want me or Yusuf to have to deal with such narrow-mindedness and contempt, and I don't blame her. I was not afraid, though. I knew that nothing would ever change if people were too afraid to follow their hearts and love who they wanted to love. Today, I feel a bittersweet happiness. It breaks my heart to know that Yusuf experiences prejudice in a way that I will never fully understand, but sharing the past two and a half years with him has been a blessing. My extended family still does not know about our relationship, because, like much of America, they do not approve of racial mingling. It is my hope that people will someday learn to accept each other, even if they cannot understand each other. I believe in equality.

Wednesdays With Yahweh

The cool night wind pulls at my hair as I slide into the car. The streetlights reflect off the wet pavement as we go beneath dark overpasses. We are simply driving out into the night that ends somewhere over the black horizon. It is just my friends and me sitting in silent wonder and enjoying each other's company. I look back at them and open my mouth as if to try and explain how free I feel, but nothing comes out. So instead of grappling with the words that evade my tongue like birds avoiding the catcher's net, I just smile, leaned back in my seat, and float off.

It was a moment of infinite feelings that words could not describe. This was God.

What is God? Who is God? How can one accurately describe God? All of these questions come without the benefit of a proper answer. I believe that He cannot be calculated in our vocabulary; God did not create words so that one day they would be used to describe him. He wanted to keep us in silent wonder. It's like what Stephen King wrote in *The Body*:

"The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of, because words diminish them- words shrink things that seemed limitless when they were in your head to no more than living size when they're brought out."

Therefore, God cannot really be a character in some book or the subject of study in a theology class because He has no limits. If He becomes any one of those things, He is deprived of His entire character and all of His traits. Something will be left out. Each person's idea of God is as unique to them as their DNA structure; built on years of experiences and emotions.

To me, it's much like Le Corbusier's famous quote, "God is in the details." I have found Him in the unexplainable emotions and feelings that have swept me away like colossal undertows. God is in those sweaty palms, those uncomfortable silences, and even when we sit down and just listen to the silence.

So often, I lose sight of Him; He becomes lost in the paint strokes. I reinvent my faith to see if He suddenly becomes relevant again, but I always forget that He's the only constant in this world and I would be able to see Him better standing still. Once I put the pieces together in my heart, God is no longer a bearded Caucasian male wielding the forces of Heaven with an outstretched finger, as romantically portrayed on Michelangelo's famous ceiling. He becomes less of a dictator and more of Father. After all, God is the ultimate "hopeless romantic;" He hung the stars in the sky so no matter where we are in the world, we can always make our ways back home, back to Him. He even hung His own Son on the cross for our salvation. Sitting all alone in Heaven, He waits day in and day out for us to take a minute or two of our day to talk with Him.

This is what God is to me: the unexplainable yet undeniable Father on whom my heart is sold out. He is the reason I feel safe driving off into the night because no matter where those roads may take me, He will be right there by my side until we both reach dawn.

Sonia Sarkar
Austin, TX

At my public high school, we strike a precarious balance between knowing what to believe and what to question. The amount of information available today is overwhelming, and I see myself and my peers struggling more and more to find an inner moral meaning and make some sense of our environment. We believe in intellectualism, above all else, preferring to dissect the debate surrounding religion over actually assigning ourselves to a certain system. At the end of an exhausting day, I find it much easier to (perhaps unfairly) define the problems of international relations in terms of religious infighting than I find it is to take sides in the controversy over school prayer.

At the age of sixteen, I can only watch in awe as beliefs (and what exactly is a belief?) are capitalized upon, criticized, and adhered to with a stronger dedication than ever. I'm not quite sure what is happening, but I do feel the deep rumblings of a change within this country and throughout the global community, and I have no choice but to believe in that change, to believe in the evolution of ideas and hope that one day we will find a common convergence point without losing faith.

I am a skeptic, but not yet a cynic, a product of Christian pre-schooling, Buddhist parables, Hindu parents, Jewish friends, and Muslim awareness. In this society that encourages well-roundedness, I have faith that a Renaissance approach to religion encourages tolerance. However method a form of Supreme Power may manifest itself to the billions of individuals throughout the world, I believe that it, too, sends its blessing to those who study the many different faces of conviction.

I honestly believe in the melding of science and art, and in the ability of one generation to build upon the achievements of the former. I know, in my limited wisdom, that empathy can travel a long way.

Pope John Paul II died this last Saturday, and despite having no Catholic ties or particular association with his great persona, I cannot help but feel resoundingly sad. As poignant photographs filter across the television screen, eulogizing and explaining a legendary man, my friends and I remark upon the ability of death to create history. Our words are downcast because we realize that to make a lasting impression during life, great actions must be taken with an ultimate certainty. Right now, we're still not sure what we know, except that we believe in living. It is a start.

The only thing I can discern with complete clarity is that I trust the values of perseverance, innovativeness, and kindness, perhaps the oldest lessons that human beings have rediscovered time and time again; it is no mistake that these are the same messages all religions and systems of belief are built upon. Continuing to read and experience my way through religion, I am slowly beginning to realize that while a complete answer may be elusive, I draw closer every time.

Tips for Writing Your *This I Believe* Essay

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 such intimacy that no one else can do it for you. To guide you through this process, we offer these suggestions:

Tell a story: Be specific. Take your belief out of the ether and ground it in the events of your life. Consider moments when belief was formed or tested or changed. Think of your own experience, work and family, 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 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, because three minutes is a very short time.

Be positive: Please avoid preaching or editorializing. Tell us what you do believe, not what you don’t believe. Avoid speaking in the editorial “we.” Make your essay about you; speak in the first person.

Be personal: This is radio. 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.

For this project, we are also guided by the original *This I Believe* series. Below, you will see the producers’ invitation to those who wrote essays in the 1950s. Their advice holds up well and we are abiding by it. Please consider it carefully in writing your piece.

In introducing the original series, host Edward R. Murrow said, "Never has the need for personal philosophies of this kind been so urgent." We would argue that the need is as great now as it was 50 years ago. We are eager for your contribution.

The Original Invitation from 'This I Believe'

This invites you to make a very great contribution: nothing less than a statement of your personal beliefs, of the values which rule your thought and action. Your essay should be about three minutes in length when read loud, written in a style as you yourself speak, and total no more than 500 words.

We know this is a tough job. What we want is so intimate that no one can write it for you. You must write it yourself, in the language most natural to you. We ask you to write in your own words and then record in your own voice. You may even find that it takes a request like this for you to reveal some of your own beliefs to yourself. If you set them down they may become of untold meaning to others.

We would like you to tell not only what you believe, but how you reached your beliefs, and if they have grown, what made them grow. This necessarily must be highly personal. That is what we anticipate and want.

It may help you in formulating your credo if we tell you also what we do not want. We do not want a sermon, religious or lay; we do not want editorializing or sectarianism or 'finger-pointing.' We do not even want your views on the American way of life, or democracy or free enterprise. These are important but for another occasion. We want to know what you live by. And we want it terms of 'I,' not the editorial 'We.'

Although this program is designed to express beliefs, it is not a religious program and is not concerned with any religious form whatever. Most of our guests express belief in a Supreme Being, and set forth the importance to them of that belief. However, that is your decision, since it is your belief which we solicit.

But we do ask you to confine yourself to affirmatives: This means refraining from saying what you do not believe. Your beliefs may well have grown in clarity to you by a process of elimination and rejection, but for our part, we must avoid negative statements lest we become a medium for the criticism of beliefs, which is the very opposite of our purpose.

We are sure the statement we ask from you can have wide and lasting influence. Never has the need for personal philosophies of this kind been so urgent. Your belief, simply and sincerely spoken, is sure to stimulate and help those who hear it. We are confident it will enrich them. May we have your contribution?

Adapted from the invitation sent to essayists featured in the original 'This I Believe' series. Excerpted from 'This I Believe 2,' copyright © 1954 by Simon and Schuster.

'THIS I BELIEVE' SUBMISSION AGREEMENT

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You affirm that you are at least 18 years of age and possess the legal right and ability to enter into this agreement, **or that you are the parent or legal guardian** of the minor between the age of 14 and 18 who is submitting the essay.

Signature of Essayist _____
Parent/Guardian Signature _____
Name _____
Address _____
City, State, Zip _____
Phone Number _____