

Elements of the *This I Believe* Essay:

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.

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 one core belief.

Be positive: Say what you do believe, not what you don't believe. Avoid statements of religious dogma, preaching, or editorializing.

Be personal: Make your essay about you; speak in the first person. Avoid speaking in the editorial "we." 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.

Authentic voice. The writer must create a narrative persona (or stance) that the reader believes authentic, or else the text risks coming off as trite or condescending. Voice is a difficult feature to discuss in writing, but readers can describe the stance a writer is taking as they react to a given style, dialogue, and point of view; they must choose whether to believe or identify. Thus, writers must seek to reveal true experiences, moments of relevance, and believed lessons learned; else, write fictional accounts as if they believed them to be true.

Narrative coherence. Most often covered in literary settings, the feature of narrative coherence regards the business of telling stories well: vivid description, controlled and appropriate pacing, subtle transitions, lively dialogue, and rich character development, for example. A personal essay generally relates a story and lessons learned; thus, if the storytelling fails, the whole essay usually fails.

Communal relevance. At the end of the essay, the reader has the right to ask "So what?" and have it answered. A writer does not merely tell a story for personal reasons, but in order to communicate a larger truth to the reader; the story is the vehicle on which this truth, often metaphorically, rides. The personal essay argues, in a way, that the beauty associated with being a human can often best be expressed through the sharing of stories. Thus, there often appear two distinct sections of a personal essay: narrative and comment. Sometimes they are neatly divided, with an immediate lapsing into a story with brief comments at the end, but such segmenting is not always the case. Other writers will choose to comment along the way, interspersing authorial intrusions into the narrative to call attention to pertinent ideas. Whatever the format, the reader understands the reason and the importance of the story beyond its aesthetic appeal.

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