

# English 30S

## Honors Freshman Composition / First-Year Seminar

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### Assignment #1: This I Believe

For thousands of years, communities of faith have identified themselves with short, carefully worded statements of belief, or *creeds*. Even today, when someone claims to follow a set of beliefs or principles, we often identify these as a *credo*, literally Latin for “I believe.” In the history of religion, creeds have both united and divided believers through statements that sometimes differed only by a few words. Muslims have gathered daily to confess, “There is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet,” even as Jews have repeated, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” The Christian creeds followed, teaching the mystery of “one God” in three persons before Protestant reformers questioned all human creeds, turning to “scripture alone” as the last word.

In the 1950s, journalist Edward R. Murrow hosted a weekly radio series inviting listeners “to write about the core beliefs that guide your daily life.” At a time of political and cultural anxiety, the show asked Nobel laureates and everyday citizens to articulate their personal articles of faith even as it called them to listen carefully to the beliefs of others. In 2005, *This I Believe* was resurrected for National Public Radio as a way “to encourage people to begin the . . . difficult task of developing respect for beliefs different from their own.” Tens of thousands of Americans have written in to join Colin Powell, Gloria Steinem, and Tony Hawk in returning the dialogue of beliefs to American broadcasting. Your final essay should attempt to add your voice to this discussion.

For this essay, you will write a 350-500 word personal essay describing an idea or principle you believe in.

For this exercise to be meaningful, you must make it wholly your own. This short statement isn’t all you believe; it’s simply a way to introduce others to some things you value. In spite of the name, your belief need not be religious or even public. You may decide to focus on commitments to family, service, political action, or the arts. As you look for a focus, try to choose concrete language and to find something that helps others understand your past, present, and future choices.

National Public Radio provides the following guidelines for *This I Believe* essay submissions:

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 one 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:** 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* and 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.

Consider the challenges of writing an essay to be read aloud. How might the process differ from writing an essay that will be read in print or online? To ensure that your essay works as an oral document, you will have the opportunity to read the finished essay to the class.

For further information and samples, please visit the *This I Believe* website at [www.thisibelieve.org](http://www.thisibelieve.org).