

THIS I BELIEVE STUDENT PACKET

	Check when done!	Assignment	Points possible	Points earned
1		Three Choice Words	10	
2		Learn from a Mistake	10	
3		Personal Goal	10	
4		Hero	10	
5		Judging by Appearances	10	
6		Overcoming Obstacles	10	
7		Forgiveness	10	
8		Fear	10	
9		Epiphany	10	
10		Pride	10	
11		Give Someone a Award	10	
12		Missed Opportunity	10	
13		Memorable Place/Favorite Gathering	10	
14		Life Lesson	10	
15		Walk the Line	10	
16		Four Corners & Show Me the Money	10	
17		This I Believe Essay	100	
		TOTAL	260	

**THIS I BELIEVE ESSAY**

After exploring several stages of the writing process, you will be asked to write a *This I Believe* essay. A *This I Believe* essay is a personal essay--an essay that is focused on a *belief or insight about life that is significant to the writer*. It may also combine elements of a personal narrative—an essay that is focused on a *significant event*, or a personal memoir—an essay that is focused on a *significant relationship* between the writer and a person, place, or object. The 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 experience and relationships that have taught the writer what individual values are most important.

ESSAY WRITING INSTRUCTIONS: Write your own statement of personal belief in the form of a personal essay in which you focus on a belief or insight about life that is significant to you. Your statement should be between 450 and 600 words. I understand how challenging this is—it requires such intimacy that no one else can do it for you. To guide you through this process, I 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.

NAME YOUR BELIEF: If you can't name it in a sentence or two, your essay might not be about belief. You are not writing a list, you must focus on one core belief.

BE POSITIVE: Please avoid preaching or editorializing. Say 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. 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.

GETTING STARTED: WRITING AN EFFECTIVE INTRODUCTION

Sometimes getting started is the hardest part for writers. Read the following tips on how to compose effective leads for the personal essay. It may actually be beneficial to postpone the writing of the lead itself until AFTER you have 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. Listen or look carefully for what makes an effective (or ineffective) lead to a personal essay. What strategies does the author use to grab your interest as a reader and make you want to continue reading?
2. You will need a powerful hook to get any readers attention. The lead is the doorway through which a writer welcomes and orients readers to the idea. Avoid beginning an essay with the statement "This I Believe." Instead, try to use at least two of the following strategies as more effective leads.

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."

SUPPORTING YOUR PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

D Dialogue

"If you can't say something good, don't say anything at all," my mother warned me throughout my childhood."

R Rhetorical Questions

"When you are eighty years old, what will you regret that you didn't do in life?"

A Anecdote

A short but detailed story that illustrates some idea point you want to make

P Personal Experience

E Example

S Statistic

ADDING AUDIENCE APPEAL TO PERSONAL ESSAYS

1. Be sure your essay is about something you care strongly or passionately enough about to elaborate on and wax eloquently into an essay. 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 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 experience.
5. Employ all the senses to convey your ideas to the reader: sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell.
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.

PERSONAL ESSAYS DO THIS:

- ☐ Communicates the significance of a central idea or insight that has a deep personal meaning to the writer.
- ☐ Purpose is more reflective, although the tone may sound persuasive
- ☐ Development of the piece is based upon the writer's personal experiences or anecdotes
- ☐ Written in first person; more conversational and subjective in tone
- ☐ Rarely requires documentation
- ☐ More informal in tone, language and subject matter

ESSAY SHOULD BE:

- ☐ Organized—The reflection is very well organized with the belief statement clearly stated in the introduction and/or conclusion. One idea or scene follows another in a logical sequence with clear transitions.
- ☐ Connection & Support—The entire reflection is related to the belief statement and allows the reader to understand much more about the topic and how it impacted the writer. Details grounded in experience.
- ☐ Free of Grammatical Errors—There are no spelling or punctuation errors in the final draft.
- ☐ Meets Written Requirements—Two to three pages, (450-500 words), typed, double spaced, 10-12 point standard font.

THE ORIGINAL INVITATION FROM “THIS I BELIEVE” IN THE 1950S

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 JOURNAL ENTRIES

It is likely that you will use one of your responses to generate a descriptive essay. Consider why you are writing and who will read your work. Choose words and a format that will suit the audience and the occasion. Use your language in natural, fresh and vivid ways to establish a specific tone. Make effective use of descriptions of appearance, images, shifting perspectives, and sensory details. As always, maintain good spelling, grammar, punctuation and sentence structure.

1. **Three choice words:** List *three choice words* that you believe in—and explain from experience why these words came to mind. These words can make up a statement, a phrase or simply be three words that are important to you. You must connect them somehow to an experience that relates why they are important to YOU specifically.
2. **Learn from a mistake:** “A man who has committed a mistake and doesn’t correct it is committing another mistake.”- Confucius (China’s most famous teacher, philosopher, and political theorist, 551-479 BC). Admission of a mistake moves the focus away from blame and toward understanding. The more challenging the goal, the more frequent and difficult setbacks will occur. Think of and describe a time when you made a mistake. How can/did you learn from it?
3. **Personal goal:** Each of us is a work in progress with a long way to go before we reach our full potential. What is a personal goal that you have? This does not necessarily have to reflect a career choice or specific achievement, but can also focus on self-improvement that would strengthen you emotionally.
4. **Hero:** “Do not let the hero in your soul perish, in lonely frustration for the life you deserved, but have never been able to reach. Check your road and the nature of your battle. The world you desired can be won, it exists, it is real, it is possible, it’s yours.” - Ayn Rand (Russian-born American writer, 1905-1982). Our society uses the word *hero* in many different ways. How do you define the word *hero*, and who is a hero in your life?
5. **Judging by appearances:** “Do not judge a book by its cover.” - American proverb. We all tend to judge people by their appearances, even though looks can be deceiving. Describe a time when you prejudged someone incorrectly based on their appearance or someone prejudged you unfairly based on how you look?
6. **Overcoming obstacles:** Everyone has problems or challenges to overcome. What obstacles are you proud to have faced and conquered or what obstacles would you like to see yourself overcome?
7. **Forgiveness:** There is a famous adage: “To err is human, to forgive divine.” Describe a time when you forgave someone or someone forgave you. Is forgiveness a worthy goal?
8. **Fear:** “Some people are afraid of what they might find if they try to analyze themselves too much, but you have to crawl into your wounds to discover where your fears are. Once the bleeding starts, the cleansing can begin.” - Tori Amos (Pop Rock Singer, b.1963). Describe an incident or an ongoing issue that has caused you to be very afraid. Explain your emotions, what you saw and heard, what actions were taken and their results, how others were or were not involved, and the resolution. Did it change your life?

9. **Epiphany:** Epiphany is defined as a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience. Describe a time when you came to a greater understanding of yourself, another person or some aspect of life. This can include a long-held belief or assumption of yours that was shattered. What event(s) triggered your greater understanding? Explain your initial ideas about that topic as compared to your altered perception after the epiphany occurred.
10. **Pride:** “Show class, have pride, and display character. If you do, winning takes care of itself.” - Paul Bryant (American college football coach, 1913-1983). Describe a time when you were proud of yourself (this does not have to be a world-class achievement). This can include a simple accomplishment like learning how to do something, a gift you gave or help you offered to someone, a performance, a great play in a game, an award, or a seemingly impossible good grade in your worst subject.
11. **Give someone an award:** Each of us knows somebody who deserves an award. Hopefully, the award can be positive like “The Best Parent,” “The Biggest Help,” “The Most Understanding,” and the like. Of course, it could be somewhat negative like “The Royal Pain,” or “The Hypocrite.” Use reasons to support the hypothetical award for someone who is or has been close to you.
12. **Missed Opportunity:** “Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.” - Thomas A. Edison (U.S. inventor, 1847-1931). Describe a missed opportunity. This doesn’t necessarily mean a missed chance and financial gain, employment, a vacation or a fun experience. It can also mean the missed opportunity to make amends, spend time with someone special or to somehow enrich your life.
13. **Memorable place/ favorite gathering:** Think of a place or gathering from your past that is significant in your memory. Describe it using sensory images, explain what makes it a memorable place and explain the role it plays in your life now. If it is no longer a place where you go, explain how the memory affects you now and what it will mean to you in the future as your life progresses.
14. **Life Lesson:** Interview a parent, guardian, or role model who has made a lasting influence upon your way of thinking and acting. You might begin this interview with the following 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?”
 - a. Listen carefully and take clear notes on what the adult says, just as though you are a reported investigating a news story.
 - b. Ask probing questions in this interview so that you will understand exactly why the adult chosen has chosen this specific message and how the adult has tried to follow this personal advice in his or her own life.
 - c. Assignment will be collected in class and used for a class discussion.
15. **Walk the Line:** Take a few minutes to reflect about the Walk the Line experience in class. What did you learn about yourself and other people? How do you feel about what you learned. What lesson do you hope to walk away with after this experience?

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Four Corners Activity—Read each of the following statements and check any that you AGREE with. Think about the circumstances or experiences in your life that may have lead to your position on this particular statement and be prepared to share with the group/class as you participate in the “Four Corners Activity.”

_____ 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...

_____ If you don’t quit, you can only win.

_____ 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.

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

NAME: _____ DATE: _____ PERIOD: _____

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