

# This I Believe

*Fourth course, First grading period, Weeks 4-5*

One half century after radio pioneer Edward R. Murrow began the CBS “This I Believe” project, NPR stations again present well-known personalities and listeners sharing their beliefs and the values that guide them. NPR states that “[i]n 2005 independent producers Jay Allison and Dan Gediman revived the series in an effort to encourage people to develop respect for beliefs different from their own.” In this lesson, your students are given the opportunity to express their beliefs and values as well as discuss those of others.



## Enduring Understanding

---

Radio producers and reporters spend much of their time interviewing experts for comments on specific topics, covering breaking news and asking ordinary citizens their opinions and experiences. The “This I Believe” project is built upon the premise that all of these people have something to say from their own perspective about experiences, values and ideals. This is the audience’s chance to reflect on the ideas of people, unfiltered by news and the reporter.



## Essential Questions

---

Why would radio want to broadcast the varied voices and values of leaders and average citizens? How can this be accomplished?



## Objectives and Outcome

---

- Introduce students to Edward R. Murrow, a broadcast legend, and, in particular, his original “This I Believe” daily program feature and its inspiration for the current NPR series.
- Students will develop a list of characteristics of the best personal essays.
- Students will write, mark and record their own “This I Believe” essays to meet the guidelines of the NPR series.
- Students will understand how this project was revived by two independent producers, the cost of production and the pitch made to get it on air.
- Students will have an audio personal essay in their portfolios that can be submitted with college and work applications.



## Suggested Time

---

Six days



## Resources and Materials

---

“This I Believe” ([www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html](http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html)) or (<http://thisibelieve.org>)  
In addition to the guidelines for entry and history of “This I Believe”, this site provides essay-writing tips and historic archives from the Edward R. Murrow original series.

This I Believe Selections, Volume I, 10 essays on the CD (\$14.95. NPR Shop) or download essays from the “This I Believe” podcast

This I Believe: Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women, audiobook, Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, editors; with a foreword by Studs Terkel



## Procedure

---

1. Have students list 10 topics, issues or actions that they think are important to everyday life and to global dynamics. These might range from saying thank you to eliminating genocide or reducing global warming. What is important is the interest students have in the topic.

Have each student select one topic to write a topic sentence and paragraph to express his or her point of view.

2. Highlight the differences between a review, a story and a commentary. One approach follows.

Remind students of columns that appear in their student, local and national newspapers. Review topics found in recent newspapers and newsmagazines. Have any of these columnists written on the same topics as found in the student journal entries? Discuss the purpose of having signed, personal opinion selections. Are there certain columnists whom they know, respect or do not respect?

After discussion of the print side, introduce students to personal commentary that is broadcast on radio. Do any stations have commentators whose only job is to provide personal comments/essays on various topics? Teachers could have taped some examples for discussion.

If students are familiar with the stories from Lake Wobegon that are shared by Garrison Keillor on A Prairie Home Companion, teachers might ask them how these are both entertaining stories and serious commentary.

How does commentary differ from other expressions of opinion? Do students expect talk show hosts to state their personal opinions? To be objective when interviewing guests? During interviews, should/do interviewers insert their own opinions? To what extent do these answers differ depending on the station and radio personality?

3. What is the purpose of having guest commentaries? How do varied perspectives and opinions contribute to dialogue and embrace the larger demographics of the listening audience?

4. Introduce students to National Public Radio’s “This I Believe” essays. NPR describes “This I Believe” as “essays of personal philosophies & values. ... In 1951, radio pioneer Edward R. Murrow began the “This I Believe” project to engage Americans and encourage them to communicate openly about the beliefs and values that guide them through life.”

Select one of the current essays that you think will interest your students and stimulate discussion. After discussion of the essay's content, play one of the Edward R. Murrow archived essays. The NPR archives include essays written by President Harry S Truman, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, physicist Albert Einstein, baseball great Jackie Robinson and a 16-year-old student. After discussion of the content, assign students to listen to three "This I Believe" essays as homework. (See Homework section for one suggested assignment to accompany listening.)

5. Discuss the characteristics that made the essays appealing. Students' comments might include who was speaking, the personality factor, unity of opening and conclusion, a different perspective on a current issue or concern, anecdotes or personal examples, honesty and willingness to be vulnerable and sincerity of the voice.

After the class has compiled a list, you might play another "This I Believe" essay that exhibits many of these characteristics. Have students indicate where the characteristics they compiled appear in the recording.

6. Establish the guidelines for the essay using the NPR rules. The essay is to "summarize your personal credo in less than five minutes." The purpose of the series: "From part-time hospital clerk Jackie Lantry describing her experiences with adoption to Pulitzer Prize-winning oral historian Studs Terkel's comments on community in action, these thoughtful essays may confirm or challenge your own principles and might even open your mind and heart to new ideas."

The 1950s series essays were "about three minutes in length when read aloud, written in a style as you yourself speak, and total no more than 500 words." Today's rules specify "Between 350-500 words, or about three minutes when read aloud at your natural speaking pace." The Frequently Asked Questions section on the Web responds to the question "How can I improve the chances of my essay being broadcast?" "First, make sure your essay is framed in a concrete belief or conviction (we receive many wonderful essays that we are unable to use because they contain no statement of belief). Then, tell us a compelling story about how you came to hold that belief, or a time that belief was challenged, or how that belief shapes your daily activities. Try sharing one belief instead of composing a list of your beliefs."

Assign writing and recording of a "This I Believe" essay. Students may refer to the journal entry that they wrote at the beginning of this unit. Would any of these topics be worth developing? If students are applying for college, review the essay topics to which they are to respond. Would any of these lend to the "This I Believe" requirements?

Review essay-writing guidelines provided by NPR (<http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/guide.html>). Also, discuss the advice given by the original producers. After covering the "'This I Believe' Essay-Writing Instructions" and the original "producers' invitation," listen to a recently aired essay. How does it meet these guidelines?

7. After students have revised their essays and are ready to record them, have them mark their copies for reading. (See "Mark It, Say It," First course, Second grading period.) Have students read aloud their essays and time them. Rewrite as necessary to meet the time requirement.

8. While students are waiting to record their essays, they can be practicing reading their essays aloud. They could also be reading “This I Believe: Louisville radio producer will help reinterpret an Edward R. Murrow classic” written by Willie Davis (<http://www.goerie.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=%2F20040616%2FLE005%2F40615021>) and the background on the inception of the current series (<http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html>).

Have students read “Indies revive Murrow’s This I Believe,” an article from Current that is included in this lesson. Discuss in class the background on Edward R. Murrow and “This I Believe” and consider the steps that Dan Gediman took to reviving “This I Believe”. Jay Allison curates the series. He decides which are the best submissions and provides them to NPR, which holds space on air for them.

9. Students share their “This I Believe” recordings with classmates. Teachers may wish to build in a Q and A time after each one.

10. Students who are 18 years old may send their essays to NPR (younger students must have their work submitted by a parent or legal guardian) thereby learning the submission process, or the class may wish to select their top five for entry. At this stage, review the “This I Believe” Submission Agreement ([www.npr.org/thisibelieve/agree.html](http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/agree.html)). Not only will students learn the amount they will be paid if an essay is selected, they will have the legal and ethical standards reinforced.

11. Discuss the following belief. Joseph Wershba in Edward R. Murrow and the Time of His Life quotes Murrow as saying in 1954: “If none of us ever read a book that was ‘dangerous,’ had a friend who was ‘different,’ or joined an organization that advocated ‘change,’ we would all be just the kind of people Joe McCarthy wants.”

12. “This I Believe” lends itself to two extensions: To study a model of entrepreneurial initiative, teachers could introduce students to and highlight the current “This I Believe” project’s inception and continuance (See “Indies revive” and the This I Believe Web resources). Secondly, if time allows, view the movie Good Night, and Good Luck. Though this film focuses on one period in Edward R. Murray’s life, students can appreciate the values and standards by which this legendary reporter lived. Use suggested activities in the study guide provided on the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation Web site ([http://www.rtndf.org/hsj/gngl/gngl\\_form.shtml](http://www.rtndf.org/hsj/gngl/gngl_form.shtml)).



## Homework

Students will listen to three “This I Believe” essays ([www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html](http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html)). Compile a list of the characteristics or qualities that make these essays appealing. Be sure students record the title, person, date of broadcast and length of each of the essays they heard.

Draft a “This I Believe” essay.

Work on revising their essays with emphasis on diction and writing for the ear. Mark their scripts for breathing, enunciation and emphasis. Students practice reading their essays to give them the right tone and to keep them within the five-minute time limit.

Read “Indies revive Murrow’s This I Believe” and This I Believe ([www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html](http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html)).



## Assessment

---

Give students credit for compiling “This I Believe” essay characteristics and sharing with the class.

Students write and mark their “This I Believe” essays for recording. Their marked script corresponds to the recorded version. (See “Mark It, Say It,” First course, Second grading period.)

Students’ recorded “This I Believe” essays meet the time limit, are easily understood and convey a clear statement of their perspective, values and beliefs. The student writer, a classmate and/or the instructor complete the “This I Believe’ Critique.”



## Academic Content Standards

---

Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works. (Standard 1, NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts)

Explain how irony, tone, mood, style and “sound” of language are used for specific rhetorical aesthetic purposes. (DCPS English Language Arts, 12.LT.5)

Write persuasive (controversial issue) essays that

- structure ideas and arguments in a sustained and logical fashion,
- engage the reader,
- use specific rhetorical devices to back up assertions (e.g., via an appeal to logic through reasoning; via an appeal to emotion or ethical belief; or by personal anecdote, case study, or analogy),
- clarify and defend positions with precise and relevant evidence, including facts, expert opinions, quotations, and/or expressions of commonly accepted beliefs and logical reasoning, and
- anticipate and address the reader’s concerns and counterclaims.

(DCPS English Language Arts, 10.W.5)

### National Benchmark

Know skills used in electronic communications (e.g., producing audio recordings and broadcasts, producing video recordings and motion pictures). (McREL, Arts & Communication Career, Grades 9-12)

Know the process of critiquing one’s own work and the work of others (e.g., making choices, forming judgments, expressing preferences based on personal and art criticism criteria). (McREL, Arts & Communication, Grades 9-12)



## Industry Standards and Expectations

---

Clearly label opinion and commentary (Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, Radio-Television News Directors Association).

“This instrument can teach, it can illuminate, yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box,” stated by Edward R. Murrow. In these words he indicated the potential of radio content to reveal the human condition and to lead to greater understanding.

“He set standards of excellence that remain unsurpassed.”

— Inscription on a plaque dedicated to Edward R. Murrow in the lobby of CBS headquarters in New York City

The challenge to the broadcaster often is to determine how to suitably present the complexities of human behavior without compromising or reducing the range of subject matter, artistic expression or dramatic presentation desired by the broadcaster and its audience. For television and for radio, this requires exceptional awareness of considerations peculiar to each medium and of the composition and preferences of particular communities and audiences. (“Responsibly exercised artistic freedom,” Statement of Principles of Radio and Television Broadcasters issued by The Board of Directors of the National Association of Broadcasters)

# "This I Believe" Critique

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Title of "This I Believe" essay \_\_\_\_\_

Word count: \_\_\_\_\_

Recorded length: \_\_\_\_\_ minutes and \_\_\_\_\_ seconds

1. Main concept (belief/value) presented in the essay: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Concept is "grounded" in a story/anecdote.

\_\_\_\_\_ The story/anecdote is compelling,

\_\_\_\_\_ The story/anecdote is original, but not compelling,

\_\_\_\_\_ The story/anecdote is interesting,

\_\_\_\_\_ The story lacks an anecdote or story

3. The essay contains one of the following:

\_\_\_\_\_ Time when the belief became the writer's own belief

\_\_\_\_\_ Time that the writer's belief was challenged

\_\_\_\_\_ Time that belief made a difference in the writer's life or those of others who he/she knows

\_\_\_\_\_ Time when a belief of someone in his/her family became the writer's belief

4. The essay clearly presents one belief. It is not cluttered with other ideas or values to confuse the listener.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

5. The essay is told in a conversational, natural manner.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes. The selection comes across as a conversation with the speaker.

\_\_\_\_\_ Partially. At times it is conversational and in other portions, it is clearly being read to meet the time requirement or to move onto the next point to be made.

\_\_\_\_\_ Only in the sections where dialogue takes place.

\_\_\_\_\_ The reading of the essay lacks a natural, conversational quality.



# Indies Revive Murrow's This I Believe

By Mike Janssen

Current Newspaper, March 14, 2005

The presidential election of 2004 laid bare just how deeply issues of belief, faith and values divide America. But an ambitious public radio series debuting next month hinges on the notion that talking about belief can also foster understanding and compassion.

On April 4, NPR launches a new version of the old commercial radio modules "This I Believe", featuring Americans explaining their values in three-minute essays. The pieces will air Mondays, alternating between "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered."

Some contributors will be famous, others not, but they "need have nothing more in common than integrity, a real honesty."

That's how star Edward R. Murrow described the people heard in the first incarnation of *This I Believe*, developed by a friend of his, adman Ward Wheelock, and hosted by Murrow from 1951 to 1955. It became hugely popular, drawing many millions of listeners daily and spawning a book that was outsold only by the Bible during the year it was published.

Essays by ordinary Americans and by luminaries such as Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry Truman aimed to give cause for hope in an era of deepening cynicism.

"I believe in the human race," said baseball star Jackie Robinson, reflecting on his struggles against racism. "I believe in the warm heart. I believe in man's integrity. I believe in the goodness of a free society. And I believe that the society can remain good only as long as we are willing to fight for it — and to fight against whatever imperfections may exist."

The first "This I Believe" aired amid widespread fears over the threat of nuclear war. Murrow asked his listeners, "What truths can a human being afford to furnish the cluttered nervous room of his mind with, when he has no real idea how long a lease he has on the future?"

Different worries plague our minds today, but "This I Believe" producers Dan Gediman and Jay Allison say the concept remains relevant. "The world is tearing itself up because of one thing, and that is belief," says Allison, an independent radio producer in Woods Hole, Mass., who as host and co-producer will introduce essays and ask listeners to contribute their own. "The idea is that rather than screaming about it, we ought to just listen. . . . It rather idealistically and rather quietly suggests another way to talk to each other."

## A hunt for shocking honesty

"This I Believe" bears hallmarks of its producers' other endeavors. Gediman, an indie based in Louisville, Ky., has built extensive outreach efforts into series such as *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* and *Breaking the Cycle: How Do We Stop Child Abuse?* Allison has turned listeners into collaborators as a moving force behind series such as *Lost and Found Sound* and the Web site *Transom.org*.



Gediman, executive producer and project director of “This I Believe”, has produced little for public radio since a piece for “This American Life” in the late ‘90s. “This I Believe” called to him two years ago when, suffering from the flu, he found the book of essays from the original series on his bedroom shelf. Though the series was a phenomenon in its time, the book is now out of print. “I thought, ‘Wait a second, how have I not heard of this?’” Gediman says. “And my second thought was, ‘Why has no one else done anything like this on public radio?’”

Gediman wasn’t alone in his thinking. When he and Allison pitched the idea to Jay Kernis, NPR’s senior vice president of programming, Kernis said he had been reading the same book just days before and envisioning it on public radio. Gediman copied about a thousand of the original “This I Believe” recordings from an old-time radio collector. Rights to the recordings expired in the ‘80s, allowing stations to air them today along with the new essays. (The title “This I Believe” was not legally subject to copyright protection.) The recordings offer insight into the attitudes of Americans early in the nuclear age. Essays are peppered with caveats like, “If the planet survives . . .”

“It’s hard to remember how truly fearful people were during that era,” Gediman says.

“I’m not so sure that’s different today,” Allison adds. “Back then we could hide under our school desks. Now we can note the danger level according to color. They’re both equally futile and helpless feelings.”

### **The ‘50s era**

“This I Believe” at first had what Allison calls a “didactic attitude,” its goal being to pass down wisdom from prominent Americans. But series producers later solicited submissions from ordinary folks. “In many cases,” Allison says, “the essays from people without credentials are much more insightful.”

The best of the original essayists framed their beliefs in anecdotes, Gediman says, and today’s contributors will also be encouraged to tell a compelling story.

“This I Believe” will strive for “shockingly honest” revelations, Allison says. But will prominent figures such as Sen. John McCain, hoopster Charles Barkley and Bill and Hillary Clinton lower their guards enough to deliver substance instead of puffery?

If the challenge arises, “This I Believe”’s producers will borrow a technique used for the series’ first run. In some cases producers condensed celebrity interviews into essays either by editing conversations or condensing interview remarks into a pithy script that the person voiced on tape. Martha Graham’s 600 words, for example, came from four hours of conversation. “You would never know which ones were compiled in this rather laborious manner,” Gediman says.

### **Believe globally, program locally**

To launch the new “This I Believe”, CPB contributed \$500,000 and Steven Spielberg’s Righteous Persons Foundation put in \$100,000. Farmers Insurance Group is the exclusive corporate sponsor. The series will run for at least a year, but Gediman is hoping for an additional year or even more. It begins with an introductory piece on NPR’s *Morning Edition* and the first essay later that day on *All Things Considered*.

“This I Believe” is already gathering essays from listeners through a half-dozen pilot stations and the series’ Web page, [thisibelieve.org](http://thisibelieve.org), and Gediman expects the first listener essay to air in April.

Initially, NPR and Allison’s Transom staffers will cull the best essays for broadcast. But in the future stations will be able to program supplemental “This I Believe” essays and, with support from the project, create their own to share throughout the system.

Through Public Radio Exchange, the online program marketplace that Allison also had a hand in creating, programmers will be able to acquire the ’50s-era commentaries, which Gediman bought from a collector of old-time radio, as well as text-only versions of all the contemporary essays that did not make the cut to air on NPR.

All essays will be searchable by theme and geographical location. Programmers can locate contemporary essayists in their markets, bring them into their studios and produce their essays. They can then upload them to PRX for other stations to air.

“This I Believe”’s pilot stations have eagerly delved into the archival material and look forward to producing their own content, Gediman says. With enough collaboration, “This I Believe” will be able to air five days a week, just as it did in the ’50s, Gediman says.

“This I Believe”’s producers seem to be scouting every possible avenue to broaden the series’ reach and extend its life well into the future. They’re working to put all the essays they harvest — even those that don’t air — in an archive, probably at a university. Pieces also will be collected in a book and producers are negotiating with a popular weekly magazine as a partner in the project. They also hope to raise its visibility by collaborating with popular television programs.

Teachers, religious leaders and public radio staffers will oversee a vast outreach effort encompassing libraries, bookstores, coffee shops, high schools, places of worship and community and senior centers. Gediman’s ultimate dream is to take “This I Believe” international in three years, translating American essays into other languages and soliciting commentaries from other countries. The original series aired on Voice of America and spawned an Arabic-language book that sold 30,000 copies in three days. “All of us are interested in making this project extend beyond the traditional public radio audience,” Allison says. “We want to see if this can’t attract just plain old anybody.”