



The Personal Philosophies  
of Remarkable Men and Women

**SAMPLE COLLEGE WRITING CURRICULUM**

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## TEACHING *THIS I BELIEVE*

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### *Introduction*

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 350–500 word personal essay.

In order to coordinate activities in colleges and secondary schools with the new series on NPR, pilot curricula have been designed to help teachers seize this exciting opportunity to motivate students to write for an authentic purpose to real-world audiences. By using assignments from this new college-level curriculum, instructors can guide students to produce a *This I Believe* essay appropriate *both* for inclusion in on-campus publications or local newspapers *and* for possible broadcast on public radio or as podcasts on the Internet.

The following assignments were developed by Dr. Kyle Dickson and Dr. Cole Bennett at Abilene Christian University in a pilot *This I Believe* college-level writing curriculum for use by teachers and students across the nation. Your feedback on these assignments—any additions or suggestions for useful resources—will be welcomed for future revision.

### *Authors' Note*

For better or worse, most students enter America's colleges with one guiding principle: good writers never, under any circumstances, use first-person pronouns. They believe that their point of view should be avoided or obscured in academic writing whenever possible. The *This I Believe* project strikes out in a bold, perhaps heretical, direction, making the *I* of the essay the subject itself. As teachers, these assignments have given us a way to talk about the power of personal writing, allowing students to reclaim their voice and viewpoint.

The *This I Believe* essay presents students with a unique writing task, and the challenges of teaching it will be met in equally inventive ways. We offer the following assignments as less a prescription than a jumpstart to energize and encourage colleagues to consider the power of the personal essay in their own course and context.

### ***Planning Multiple Drafts***

Though *This I Believe* essays present students with a unique writing task, there are numerous ways to ensure the assignment serves broader course goals in the typical first-year composition sequence. One approach outlined in this curriculum is to plan a series of assignments that help students produce a final essay through multiple drafts.

1. The first of these assignments would represent a brainstorming exercise or shorter draft. The Credo Exercise below asks students to choose a personal belief they can define in 250 words or less. Articulating their personal credo challenges them to find the heart of their belief before worrying about presentation. What are the tenets of their faith in family, in community service, or in the blogosphere? They will have time to consider how best to develop this belief through narration and illustration later. The credo allows them to get started clearly outlining the belief without worrying about the final form of their essay.

2. A later, graded draft would then ask students to write a 3–4 page *This I Believe* essay that frames their topic in an original way, bringing the abstract belief vividly to life. As a part of this process, students should be introduced to the *This I Believe* Essay Writing Instructions (see page 14) and develop their

*“Writing about what I believe was exceptionally difficult. I had to go through a writing process that consisted of several drafts. The first of these were so horrible it was embarrassing to read them to myself. After a few suggestions I attempted to assemble some examples of how I came to this belief and how I apply it in my life. Eventually I was able to produce a semi-decent, more down-to-earth composition. Out of this fire of literary trial I feel that I have forged a better perception of what it is I truly do believe instead of what I think I believe.”*

own criteria for what makes strong personal writing. This second draft will produce something more in line with traditional college composition length requirements and give them ample room to explore their belief using a variety of strategies.

3. Finally, students would be asked to ruthlessly revise their essay back to the 350–500 word limit for

submission to the *This I Believe* website. This process of invention, expansion, and distillation should challenge them to look for the most effective statements and illustrations of their belief. Past students have described this as a frustrating but ultimately clarifying process that forced them not only to rewrite carefully but also to commit to a more clearly defined set of principles.

Obviously the movement from invention and expansion to distillation is also at the heart of the writing process. The following series of prompts, assignments, and discussion questions will help frame the *This I Believe* assignment for students and encourage their reflection on developing an effective process for future college-level writing.

## BEFORE WRITING

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### *What is a Personal Essay?*

Published writers often speak of the Personal Essay genre with profound respect for the authenticity, vulnerability, and poignancy that comes from allowing readers into their lives. As readers and writers, if we believe in certain shared strands of meaning that hold all of humanity together, these commonalities are often articulated through the stories of our lives. After all, though our individual narratives vary widely, the themes are often the same: romance, family, growing up, nature, spirituality, neighbors, home, war, and death, for example. These common experiences often create a sense of community, and the personal essay can yield moments of profound clarity as the writer and the reader share complex understanding through local turns of phrase.

In school contexts, the personal essay is often thought of as a starting place for writers—a first assignment that allows students to begin with what they know before moving outward into research writing. Many teachers might tend to view the genre as simple, unobtrusive writing that flows easily, far less complex than rhetorical analyses or responses to literature. However, many composition scholars disagree with this view, validating the multivalent forces at work in this genre—a writer seeking to reveal, to communicate with an intended audience, to express the importance of the revelation, to invite common truths, and so on.

Others might believe that a young person has little to say through narration that would appeal to a larger audience; after all, doesn't communal relevance come only through lived experience and maturity not generally found in adolescence? Such relevance is absolutely present, albeit different in significant and refreshing ways. A young writer on the cusp of adulthood is embedded in a tangle of experience and emotion that most readers have left behind; to capture this moment and to enable others to re-experience the germ of its beauty represents a serious challenge that rewards writers and readers alike.

Thus, in moving toward a list of desired characteristics for a personal essay, it seems we could address the following points:

**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. The same elements of narration that we celebrate in studies of canonical literature can be studied and applied to student narratives.

**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.

1. Discuss the appeal of personal writing with students.
  - Where do you most often read first-person narratives?
  - What features do they share?
2. Read a sample essay from the *This I Believe* site or elsewhere aloud.
3. Have students break into groups and discuss the success of the essay using the criteria of personal writing.
  - Does essay create an authentic voice? Which sections of the essay strike readers as truthful, either intellectually or emotionally?
  - Does essay reflect narrative coherence? What element of storytelling does it successfully introduce?
  - Does essay conclude with some communal relevance? How should essay balance between communicating meaning and preaching?

### ***Credo Assignment***

Traditionally creeds are communal texts read and repeated in worship to remind the faithful of common beliefs. Religious historian Jaroslav Pelikan describes a moment in the spiritual development of a people—speaking of the Massai of Africa—where they can no longer repeat the prayers and creeds of their teachers but must find their own words for their own context. In many ways, the same is true of college students moving away from family, neighborhood, and hometown and trying to find beliefs and a voice that is truly their own.

For this assignment, compose a personal credo that distills your unique approach to life into a short statement of no more than 250 words. We'll have time to add flesh to this skeleton later, but for now you're simply defining your belief as precisely as possible.

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 credo 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.

**Credo Research Exercise.** As you begin to articulate your own credo, spend some time reflecting on creeds that have shaped political, social, or religious movements you're interested in. Spend 15–20 minutes researching statements that have galvanized a group of people or shaped a movement.

Would you consider the Preamble to the Constitution or the Communist Manifesto as creeds? Do Amnesty International, Greenpeace, or other campus groups use statements of belief to identify themselves?

Can creeds be negative as well as positive statements, dividing as well as uniting people? In an interview on "The Need for Creeds," Jaroslav Pelikan suggests, "in the darkest hours of life, you've got to believe something specific, and that specification is the task of the creed, because, much as some people may not like it, to believe one thing is also to disbelieve another. To say yes is also to say no." Would you agree that human societies need creeds?

**The Need for Creeds** with Jaroslav Pelikan on NPR

<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/pelikan/transcript.shtml>

**Wikipedia** introduces the creeds of religious, political, and social groups

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creed>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American's\\_Creed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American's_Creed)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scout\\_Promise](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scout_Promise)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodhisattva\\_vows](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodhisattva_vows)

**A Note on Credos.** This assignment provides the first, best opportunity to discuss and illustrate the real diversity represented by the *This I Believe* essay. Whether you bring in the opening paragraphs of your favorite national essays or read through the student examples below, this is the time in the assignment cycle to highlight the diversity of belief in your classroom. Obviously terms like *credo* and *belief* trigger religious associations. Allowing students to articulate their commitments, not through inherited doctrine but through lived experience, will refine those beliefs, but it's equally important to explore the broader spectrum of beliefs that make up the melting pot of our communities. Here are a few Credo openings followed by links to teachable essays online.

*I believe in stories. Stories that live and breathe. Stories that are fruitful and multiply. That create stories within stories. Bring into being stories of my own. I want stories that provoke a powerful response be it tears, laughter, or thought. I desire a story to have a gravity of its own. If it's not worth telling more than once, it's not worth telling. It should continue to pull me back again and again . . .*

\* \* \*

*I believe that music is a force that stands and beckons the souls of humans to step out of their secret places. I have seen the power of a guitar's voice as it draws out the souls of strangers in a crowd from under their superficiality and holds them spellbound as one. I have felt an overwhelming sense of unity fall over a huge crowd of people when the insightful artist reveals his sorrow, his frustration, or his overwhelming joy with a melody. I believe in closed eyes and dim lighting, in tapping feet, concert halls, and heads carried up and down by the rolling swells of a melody. . .*

\* \* \*

*I believe in the wisdom of the ages. My happiest place was sitting on my grandmother's counter, while she was cooking, trying to memorize her cornbread recipe. I would sit on her powder blue carpet and run my fingers over the hand stitches of her many old quilts, while the colored glass humming bird feeders on her porch made patches of purple and green move slowly around her living room. Her wisdom slipped by so many, but I drank it in like sunlight. . .*

**Be Cool to the Pizza Dude** by Sarah Adams

[http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp\\_ShowEssay.php?uid=23&yval=0&start=0](http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp_ShowEssay.php?uid=23&yval=0&start=0)

**Always Go to the Funeral** by Deirdre Sullivan

[http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp\\_ShowEssay.php?uid=8&yval=0&start=0](http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp_ShowEssay.php?uid=8&yval=0&start=0)

**Leaving Identity Issues to Other Folks** by Phyllis Allen

[http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp\\_ShowEssay.php?uid=26&yval=0&start=0](http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp_ShowEssay.php?uid=26&yval=0&start=0)

**A Grown-up Barbie** by Jane Hamill

[http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp\\_ShowEssay.php?uid=21259&yval=0&start=0](http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp_ShowEssay.php?uid=21259&yval=0&start=0)



## ***Student Listening Exercise***

*"The world is tearing itself up because of one thing, and that is belief. 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."*

Jay Allison, Series Host and Co-Producer

We can all remember situations in which others have passionately stood up for their belief, and we often consider the purpose of these declarations to be persuasive or evangelistic: "My belief is validated if I win you over to it." And yet as executive producer Dan Gediman introduced the series in 2005, he argued that "The goal of *This I Believe* is not to persuade Americans to agree on the same beliefs but to encourage Americans to pursue the much more difficult task of developing respect for beliefs different from their own."

As a step toward developing this kind of mutual respect, we're going to prepare to write our own *This I Believe* essays by listening carefully to the voices of others. Before next class, spend some time completing the following exercise. Please bring copies of 3 online essays to class with short summaries of each.

1. Visit [www.thisibelieve.org](http://www.thisibelieve.org) and search the essay database for submissions from your city or state *or* for essays on a theme of interest to you.
2. Skim quickly through the opening paragraphs of several of these essays and print copies of 3 you'd like to read.
3. Read through each essay the first time listening for the author's unique voice. What experiences have shaped the lives of each? How does each respond, physically or emotionally, to these experiences?
4. Without attempting to indicate your agreement or disagreement with the essay, write a 1–2 paragraph summary of the author's core belief and the way this belief has shaped life in the past or present. Each summary should be scrupulously accurate in recording the philosophy that guides the life and choices of each author.
5. Bring the essays and your summaries to class and be ready to discuss the original ways these writers responded to the assignment. How do they establish their own unique voice through each essay?

### *I Believe in Music Discussion*

The following songs reflect the personal creeds or philosophies of singers and songwriters for the past half-century. These songs represent beliefs that are at times inspirational and powerful, at others more sentimental and private. This exercise demonstrates how beliefs cover a wide spectrum of moods and attitudes.

***Frank Sinatra***

I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows.  
I believe that somewhere in the darkest night, a candle glows.  
I believe for everyone who goes astray, someone will come to show the way.  
I believe, I believe.

\* \* \*

***Don Williams***

But I believe in love.  
I believe in babies.  
I believe in Mom and Dad.  
And I believe in you.

\* \* \*

***Whitney Houston***

I believe the children are our future.  
Teach them well and let them lead the way.  
Show them all the beauty they possess inside.

\* \* \*

***R. Kelly***

I believe I can fly, I believe I can touch the sky.  
I think about it every night and day, spread my wings and fly away.  
I believe I can soar. I see me running through that open door.  
I believe I can fly.

\* \* \*

***Blessid Union of Souls***

I believe that love is the answer.  
I believe that love will find the way.

1. Divide students into groups and ask them to list more recent lyrics that communicate a personal philosophy, even if they don't use the "I believe" formula.
2. What emotional weight do these lyrics communicate, or fail to communicate? Are some beliefs harder to express or personalize than others? Why?
3. Obviously love and family are not the only beliefs worth communicating. Take 5 minutes to list as many ideas people believe in as you can. When you are finished, compile a representative list on the board.

## WRITING THE ESSAY

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### *This I Believe Essay Assignment*

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 is one Lord.” 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 revived for NPR 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 3–4 page personal essay describing an idea or principle you believe in.

*“The credo assignment that I turned in as a precursor to the This I Believe essay turned out almost exactly how I wanted it to. However, I had some trouble fleshing out my core belief into something tangible that a reader could identify with.*

*“The main struggle that I faced in building up my belief was in transforming it from a more poetic, subjective idea into something objective and supportable. My credo was based on creating a feeling in a poetic style based largely on imagery and mood. My essay, on the other hand, needed to be built around a more specific example of what I was trying to get at while at the same time retaining the mood that I wanted. It was difficult to get in a vivid description of the image I had in my mind and set the mood and keep the whole thing under the 500-word limit.”*

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.

### *Audience Awareness Discussion*

Careful consideration of one's audience has always been important to the creation of effective discourse. How well does the writer know his or her audience? What bonds already exist between writer and reader? How can the writer demonstrate credibility, authority, and trustworthiness with a given audience? Such questions must be taken into account in each writing situation and can even be generative when beginning to form ideas and plan an essay.

One of the biggest hurdles writing teachers must overcome is convincing students to imagine readers beyond the classroom. That is, the bulk of texts produced in composition classes in the American education system have been created for an evaluative reader (the teacher), rather than a true audience who plans to read and respond or read and enjoy.

The *This I Believe* assignment, by virtue of being a text intended for public reading or distribution, removes this hurdle so that the student writes for a sympathetic yet sophisticated audience. The teacher becomes a coach to help the student meet a legitimate rhetorical task rather than a mere evaluator focused on the surfaces of style or correctness.

1. Discuss the characteristics of the audience for your *This I Believe* essay. Who will be reading your essay? What are their expectations or needs as readers?
2. Edward R. Murrow's original series first appeared on national radio before publication in a series of *This I Believe* books translated into several languages. This would have made questions of audience very complex.
  - What effect might the medium—radio or print—have had on the style of these essays?
  - How would you present your ideas differently if they were to first appear in a newspaper, a blog, on the radio, or a podcast?
  - Are some of these audiences public and some private? Imagine your essay being heard or read in a barber shop, coffee shop, or area bookstore. What expectations would each of these audiences have?
3. Discuss how television broadcasters and personalities establish credibility or authority with their audience. How does an author establish trust or interest through a personal essay?
4. How are these audiences and their expectations similar or different than those associated with traditional college essay writing?

### ***What Makes Good Writing Discussion***

As students begin their own essays, it's helpful to think about the hallmarks of effective writing. Some of these characteristics may be particular to personal essays; others may be more broadly applicable to any writing task. Simply discussing the criteria readers use to judge good writing should give students a clearer idea of techniques and strategies they might employ in their early drafts.

**Criteria Discussion.** Break students into groups and have them look over the *This I Believe* essays they printed and brought to class last time. Using examples drawn from these essays, begin with the following question:

- What makes writing memorable, accessible, and effective?

After giving students 10 minutes in groups, compile a list of their responses on the board. To help direct discussion, you might begin with 2 or 3 characteristics of your own. Be ready to distinguish between criteria useful on this assignment and in all writing situations.

**Handout Discussion.** At the end of this preliminary discussion, hand out the “*This I Believe* Essay-Writing Instructions” and walk through the recommendations from the national [www.thisibelieve.org](http://www.thisibelieve.org) site. These questions parallel the last 4 sections of the following handout.

**Be Brief.** Spend some time discussing the challenges of the 500-word format. What strategies did these essay writers employ to overcome any potential limitation?

**Be Precise.** The instructions ask writers to “name” their belief. Many essays on the *This I Believe* website begin or end with an overt “I believe” statement. What impact does stating their belief directly have? Is this the best or only way to introduce essays of this kind?

**Be Positive.** Discuss the challenge of defining belief in positive terms. Have students think of examples of times they have defined themselves negatively—either what they don't believe or who they don't agree with—then discuss the strength/weakness of this as a basis for belief. In light of Pelikan's comment that “to believe one thing is also to disbelieve another,” how might a statement of belief be presented positively? What might it look like in an essay?

**Be Personal.** Have students reflect again on the earlier discussion of personal writing. Telling your own story in your own words is clearly a powerful, concrete way to share belief. What narrative, storytelling elements did these essays include to make the personal memorable? Is there a difference between being personal and confessional?

## ***This I Believe Essay-Writing Instructions***

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 intense self-examination, and many find it difficult to begin. 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. The shorter length forces you to focus on the belief that is central to your life.

**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.

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.

## ***This I Believe Essay-Writing Instructions***

<http://www.thisibelieve.org/essaywritingtips.html>

## ***Murrow’s 1950s Introduction to Series***

[http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp\\_ShowEssay.php?uid=16844](http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp_ShowEssay.php?uid=16844)

## AFTER WRITING

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### *Acting on Belief Exercise*

The final step students complete in submitting their essays to the national *This I Believe* site is to reflect on the experience of writing the essay. One way to help guide students into reflecting upon their writing process is through discussing the relation between belief and action. A characteristic of the saints or hypocrites of any age and faith is the apparent connection or disconnection between faith and works, words and actions.

Students in almost any college or university context value honesty and authenticity in relationships and a genuine connection with a wider community. Where students are challenged to think about the relation between their own stated beliefs and the evidence of their lives, these types of judgments may reflect back on themselves.

One student described the process in the online reflection questions:

*“As I began to try to put my beliefs into words, perhaps the largest challenge was the search for a suitable topic. I started out by writing about 50 ‘this I believe’ statements. Then I wrote two bad and forced essays. I tried to sum up all of what I should believe in very few words. Finally, I decided not to write about what I should believe or what I wish I believed, but I wrote about something I actually believed in. As soon as I let the essay write itself, it started to sound pretty good.*

*“It was very hard for me to separate in my mind the things that I wished I believed from what I actually believe. For example, I wish that I believed in fate, but when it comes down to it, I don’t think I do. I also wish that I believed in charity, but I must not believe in it very strongly, because I rarely volunteer. I believe that your beliefs are necessarily defined by your actions. And as I truly examined how I live my life, my final essay emerged.”*

1. Ask students to identify (positively) beliefs they see men and women demonstrating visibly on campus or in their community.
2. What is the relationship between belief and action?
3. Some topics might be described as “actionable beliefs,” or ideas likely to guide or ground future choices within society. How does putting action into the equation move belief beyond the abstract and theoretical? In what way is a statement of belief a social statement?
4. Some topics might better be described as “essentially contested concepts,” ideas philosophers suggest would find general agreement in a society (like love or justice) but must be articulated and applied in every age and culture. In what ways is a definition of belief a philosophical proposition?

### ***Audio Essay Assignment***

Historically, computers have been a mixed blessing in college writing classrooms. The majority of students entering college today have always composed at the computer, yet an increasing amount of the writing they do is dashed-off messages to friends and family via email, IM, or Facebook. How can composition instructors increase the amount of time students spend in the writing process through a greater investment in the final product itself? One solution lies in the audio essay.

The *This I Believe* assignment already involves students in a wider debate of public and private commitments and encourages them to add their own voice to this dialogue. Encouraging students to read essays aloud in class or record them for podcast raises the investment by introducing their writing to a broader, real-world audience. Much like their NPR counterparts, student podcasts emphasize the diversity of speakers or viewpoints in a class through the unique power of the human voice. Assignments like these, in providing students a genuine task and audience, value the experiences and expertise each brings to the classroom. Whether podcasts are shared with the class, the campus, or the world, students move from simply receiving information to a higher-level of investment in crafting and refining messages of their own.

1. Increasingly low-cost recording tools are capable of producing high-quality results. Portable solutions such as the Blue Snowball USB Microphone or the XtremeMac MicroMemo attachment for iPod can put a recording studio in the classroom for under \$100. Don't be discouraged if you've never recorded a podcast before. Ask for volunteers and let your students take ownership of the audio production itself.
2. For assignments that will be shared beyond the walls of the classroom, consider letting students choose to participate. Whether you're podcasting audio essays or submitting final drafts to the growing *This I Believe* online database, students should be able to choose when and where their words are shared.
3. Many schools have found more low-tech means to move student voices beyond the classroom. Some have formed partnerships with local public radio stations to produce a short run of local *This I Believe* essays. Others have planned an evening of essay readings in libraries or other community centers. Though students of the YouTube generation may seem predisposed to sharing their most intimate thoughts with a world-wide audience, the personal interaction and appreciation of a simple public reading on campus or in the community can bring groups together in powerful ways.



### ***Peer Evaluation Exercise***

As we've already suggested, an important step in writing about belief is reading and reflecting on the beliefs of others. Most college composition classes involve some type of peer evaluation step in producing student essays that is essential in revising the *This I Believe* essay. Students are often anxious when sharing any writing with readers, so some care should be given to framing peer feedback for an essay built on a personal belief. You might clarify for students that at this stage they're not being asked to weigh or evaluate the belief itself but to respond to its presentation.

**Instructions.** After dividing students into groups, distribute these questions or some of your own to help focus their peer responses.

1. Clarity
  - Point out any confusing sentences or passages. Were you able to follow the general direction of key ideas or stories easily?
2. Persuasiveness
  - Are you persuaded to agree or at least to say, "OK, I can respect that"?
  - What types of evidence are included? Are there vivid details, memorable vignettes, or striking phrases?
  - Warn the writer of cliché thinking or of not grappling with key issues.
3. Strength of Introduction and Conclusion
  - Does the introduction create interest?
  - Does the conclusion punch home the main point?
4. Editing
  - Don't do a complete editing job, but point out the most distracting slips in usage and mechanics.
5. Style
  - How will this sound when read aloud?
  - Long sentences are fine if they move well, but point out any parts that seem choppy or pretentious.
  - Point out any special successes with parallelism or climactic structure.
6. Most Successful Passage
  - Summarize a passage of one to four sentences, and add a note to explain why it's successful.

### **Revising Belief Discussion**

Perhaps the most important step in any curriculum is meta-critical reflection: thinking about what we've learned. In the writing classroom, this is a crucial opportunity for students to close the loop, coming back to think about the particular challenges of the writing process. Moving students consciously through the steps of invention, expansion, and distillation outlined here can help emphasize the way their ideas are formed or refined through writing.

This reflection is even more important when talking about belief. It's too easy for men and women of any age to settle into an ill-defined set of inherited

*"I'm not going to lie, it was really difficult to write the This I Believe essay. It took a lot to put my feelings into words, well, clear words. I'm just starting to understand who I am and what I want to do with my life. It really helps to start with the most basic part of me, what I believe in. Even though I won't be sharing my beliefs with a national audience, it really was helpful to get my thoughts and feelings out on paper. At first the blank page was very intimidating, but after the first few sentences, I actually enjoyed trying to string together concrete words about an abstract belief. In retrospect, I really appreciate the opportunity this assignment presented."*

positions. Writing offers the opportunity to frustrate this type of easy faith. Writing forces us to commit to something as we shape the next sentence or paragraph. The process of writing—moving from drafting to revision and rewriting—may even challenge us to think about the nature of belief. Is belief a journey or is it a destination? Are our beliefs static or in flux?

This conversation can follow the essay assignment immediately or be

scheduled at the end of the semester. If enough time has elapsed, have students reread their *This I Believe* essay before class. The following questions should help begin the discussion:

1. Ask students to list beliefs they held when they were 5 or 10 years old.
2. After students have completed their lists, ask them to circle those beliefs they still hold as passionately today. Second underline those they will still believe when they are 50 or 80 years old.
3. As you compile their beliefs on the board, identify or classify them as social, political, religious, public, personal, etc.
4. Are any of these commitments diminished because they may look different in 10–20 years? Are some types of beliefs tied to age? What role do life experience or the beliefs of others play in refining values?

## OTHER RESOURCES

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***This I Believe in the Classroom*** for ideas from the Educator Database

<http://www.thisibelieve.org/educationoutreach.html>

**Essay Submission Form** for submitting essays to *This I Believe* project

<http://www.thisibelieve.org/agree.html>

**Sample High School Curriculum** with alternate exercises and assignments

<http://www.thisibelieve.org/educationoutreach.html>

**Open Source Podcast** interview with Jay Allison

<http://www.radioopensource.org/this-i-believe/>

**Written Voices Podcast** with Jay Allison and Dan Gediman

<http://www.writtenvoices.com/titlepage.asp?ISBN=0805080872>

***This I Believe* on Wikipedia** gives background on series

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/This\\_I\\_Believe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/This_I_Believe)

**NPR Press Release for *This I Believe* Series**

<http://www.npr.org/about/press/050317.thisibelieve.html>

**Review of *This I Believe* Series**

<http://www.current.org/radio/radio0505believe.shtml>

