

Seeking New Horizons with This I Believe

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Introduction

What follows is a set of assignments we have used in two developmental writing courses (English 090 and English 095 at our college) over the last year based on the NPR *This I Believe* radio series and anthologies. The community dialogue about beliefs along with personal stories shared in the classroom, in the print anthologies, and on the website have proven to be popular with our students and make for an engaging curriculum in a writing course.

Thisibelieve.org provides a variety of resources to aid instruction—including audio recordings of writers reading their essays and extensive curricula that may be downloaded for a donation of \$15.

We offer but a sampling that draws from some of the assignments downloaded from the website as well as assignments that are our own creations. The Belief Questionnaire, for instance, makes a great icebreaker on the first day of class—getting students to talk about beliefs and share stories right away. Other assignments might be used for in-class writing exercises or more fully developed essays.

Perhaps some of this material will appeal to you. Feel free to you use a single assignment or the whole set, and let us know if your students enjoy and benefit from it as much as ours have.

Sincerely,

Dodie and Sandy

Belief Questionnaire

What Do You Think?

In the space in front of each belief statement, write an “A” if you agree or a “D” if you disagree.

- _____ 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 . . .
- _____ People learn from their mistakes.
- _____ 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.
- _____ Doing what’s right doesn’t just mean obeying the law.

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

Prompts to Explore in a Journal or Writer's Notebook

Directions: Reflect on any one of these prompts for 10 minutes.

1. Everyone has problems or challenges to overcome in life. What has been the most challenging or rewarding moment in your life?
2. Have you ever been in a situation when you didn't quite have the courage to take action when you felt you should?
3. Did you ever have to confront someone very different from you? If so, what happened? What did you learn?
4. Have you ever been disappointed because someone made you a promise that they failed to keep? Or have you broken a promise that you made to someone else?
5. Can you think of someone who has taught you a valuable lesson about life? Can you remember the exact moment when that lesson occurred?
6. Have you ever had a "do something" moment—a time when you realized you had to take action in order to make a change happen?
7. Have you ever changed your mind about something that you were previously certain about? What was the moment that led to this change?
8. What do you believe are the most important "rules to live by"? When did you learn those rules, and who taught you? Choose one of those rules to explore more in depth.
9. We all tend to judge people by their appearances, even though looks can be deceiving. Have you ever prejudged someone incorrectly based on appearances, or has someone ever prejudged you unfairly based on how you look?
10. Finish this sentence: "If there's one thing I've learned about life, it is . . ."

Sample Writing Assignments

Essay #1 assignment: Making Connections

Topic: For this assignment, you will be reflecting on your personal experience and sharing with your reader what you learned from that experience. In other words, a personal essay is *focused on belief or insight about life* that is significant to you. We learn from our experiences and our relationships and they teach us what individual values are most important. You may choose one of the following four topics to develop your essay:

1. Wayne Coyne believes that we can create our own happiness. However, bad things do happen, and sometimes people we care about do let us down; sometimes we may let them down, too. Most of us have been in a situation where we made a promise that for one reason or another we were unable to keep. When were you disappointed because someone made you a promise that they failed to keep? Or when did you break a promise that you made to someone else?
2. Joshua Yuchacz writes that “we’re all different in our own ways.” He discusses what it was like in school having Asperger’s syndrome and what it was like to be judged by his peers. Unfortunately, we all tend to judge people by their appearances even though looks can be deceiving. Have you ever prejudged someone incorrectly based on their appearance or has someone ever prejudged you unfairly based on how you look?
3. Jon Carroll claims that “failure is a good thing,” and we have all probably experienced failure at some point in our lives. Oftentimes we fail because of life circumstances, and most everyone has problems or challenges to overcome. What obstacles are you proud to have faced or conquered?
4. “We all need mending,” according to Susan Cooke Kitteredge. Very few people pass through this life without having something devastating happen to them. Discuss an experience that you had that forever changed you, that you found you couldn’t completely “fix,” but you did find that you could at least “mend” the damage that was done to you.

Essay #2 assignment: This I Believe

Topic: After having read several *This I Believe* essays, you should be ready to create your own statement of personal belief. This is challenging – it requires intense self-examination, and many find it difficult to begin. To guide you through this process, consider the following suggestions:

- **Tell a story:** Be specific. Take your belief out of your head 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. Write in words and phrases that are comfortable for you to speak. You need to let your own voice shine through. 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.

Essay #3 assignment: SQR (Summarize, Quote, Respond)

Topic: This assignment requires you to actively apply critical reading strategies to one of essays from *This I Believe* and write a developed response to the essay. Choose an essay from the book that you can connect to your own life (or beliefs) in some way. Look over your annotations and notebook reaction to get in touch with some of the ideas you recorded the first time you read the essay. Then give the essay a fresh reading to see what else you think. Notice any changes in your understanding and your reaction. You may see things on your second or third reading that you hadn't noticed the first time through.

Once you feel like you have a good understanding of the author's essay, write a paper that includes each of these elements:

1. In the first paragraph, summarize the reading.
2. In the second paragraph, quote a passage (one or more sentences) from the reading that expresses an idea you find particularly thought-provoking and can relate to. Quote the author's words exactly as they appear on the page and add an MLA parenthetical citation.
3. After the quote, in two or more paragraphs, write about a personal connection you have to the idea expressed in the quote. Explain why the message expressed in the quote is significant to you. Then use your own experience to illustrate your connection. Tell a story from your life or explore a variety of related examples that fit with the idea. For instance, maybe the quote from Martha Graham's essay "An Athlete of God" reminds me of a time when I had to practice again and again in order to be good at something. I could write about that experience and talk about the obstacles I had to face in order to persevere and reach my desired goal.
4. In your last paragraph, share your final thoughts. What life lesson did you learn? How is the author's essay and the quote you selected a powerful reminder for you—and perhaps others?

Prewriting Activity for SQR (can be done in-class or assigned as homework)

- 1) Make a list of “I believe” statements from 10 different essays in our book *This I Believe*.
- 2) Then answer these questions:
 - a) What is a belief?
 - b) What makes some belief statements more interesting than others?
 - c) Which of these belief statements expresses an opinion you might like to write about too?

Essay #4 assignment: Film Analysis (e.g. *Freedom Writers* or *Mary and Max*)

Topic: Your last writing project will be an essay that analyzes a belief or life lesson presented in a film. Your job will be to explain and support the lesson you see, using detailed events and ***at least two quotations*** from the film to show readers where and how this lesson comes across.

The finished essay should have these elements:

1. In the first paragraph of your essay, try to create interest in the film and its subject matter. Then clearly state what belief or life lesson you see portrayed in the film. The “life lesson” you identify will be the ***thesis*** of your essay.
2. In a number of body paragraphs discuss the ***key parts*** of the film that relate to the belief/life lesson. For each part, discuss some ***specific examples or quotes*** from the film, explaining how these examples fit with the belief/lesson you see.
3. Finally, in your last paragraph, explain why you believe the life lesson you identified matters. You may talk about how the lesson matters to ***you*** by making a personal connection. Or you may explain why it’s an important message that can be valuable to most of us who watch the film.

* **Note:** More resources are available at thisibelieve.org. Curricula for various levels of learning may be downloaded with a minimum donation of \$15.