

Essay 1: Personal Essay, “This I Believe” (with Podcast)

The best essay topics are an itch you need to scratch.

--Bruce Ballenger

WHAT’S THE ASSIGNMENT?

“This I Believe is an international organization engaging people in writing and sharing essays describing the core values that guide their daily lives.” For our first assignment, we’ll each be contributing an essay to the series, as well as creating a podcast. We’ll follow the guidelines of the website’s assignment (you can find that [here](#)). You’re encouraged—but not required—to [submit](#) your essay to This I Believe or [This I Believe at TCU](#). You’ll be writing a short, personal essay that fits the This I Believe guidelines. Don’t let the title make you think you need to write abstractly or broadly. Remember, as Ballenger says in *The Curious Writer*, “[the personal essay] often captures the writer as a particular moment in time,” so your topic doesn’t need to be something major or dramatic but something you can both describe that illustrates your belief (72). In your essay, you want to **1) share a story that shows your experiences and observations and 2) tell what your thinking about those stories might mean about a belief you have.**

A successful This I Believe essay:

- ✓ **Focus/Purpose/Genre:** has a controlling idea (meaning there is a point and purpose beyond just telling a story) that isn’t simple or cliché (you figuring something out about yourself on the page) about a belief; the essay works to find the significance in something following the rhetorical situation of the essay genre, and This I Believe specifically.
- ✓ **Support:** has a controlling idea that is shown and supported through specific and concrete details, experiences, and scenes that demonstrate the point of the essay (though the writer may not know that him/herself until later drafts)
- ✓ **Style and Conventions:** is writing that uses rich, particular details to bring the narrative to life, uses sentence variety and has a sense of the writer’s “voice” as appropriate to the writing situation; the piece is basically error-free (follows appropriate conventions of grammar, spelling, and punctuation for the genre).

Course outcomes met:

- ❖ *Write in a range of genres, using appropriate rhetorical conventions*
- ❖ *Demonstrate the ability to employ flexible strategies for generating and revising your writing (such as: invention, drafting, revising, recording, and editing)*

HOW DO I APPROACH THE ASSIGNMENT?

We’ll read and listen to sample This I Believe pieces, brainstorm, and talk to help generate a topic that focuses on a narrow slice from your life (think small, and think of just a moment or event or two that illustrate your point: you only have two pages) and then work to understand the significance of the experience as a way to describe a belief you have. The more specific you are, the more people can connect to your piece, as paradoxical as that may seem. Here are the This I Believe guidelines:

“Tell a story: Be specific. Take your belief out of the ether and ground it in the events of your life. Consider moments when belief was formed or tested or changed. Think of your own experience, work, and family, and tell of the things you know that no one else does. Your story need not be heart-warming or gut-wrenching—it can even be funny—but it should be *real*. Make sure your story ties to the essence of your daily life philosophy and the shaping of your beliefs.

Be brief: Your statement should be between 350 and 500 words. That’s about three minutes when read aloud at your natural pace.

Name your belief: If you can't name it in a sentence or two, your essay might not be about belief. Also, rather than writing a list, consider focusing on one core belief, because three minutes is a very short time.

Be positive: Please avoid preaching or editorializing. Tell us what you do believe, not what you don't believe. Avoid speaking in the editorial "we." Make your essay about you; speak in the first person.

Be personal: Write in words and phrases that are comfortable for you to speak. We recommend you read your essay aloud to yourself several times, and each time edit it and simplify it until you find the words, tone, and story that truly echo your belief and the way you speak."

In conjunction with this essay, **you'll also make an audio recording of your essay** and submit the text and audio versions in your portfolio. **In your final author's note, you'll reflect on how the audio recording may help you revise the final product of your essay** (*i.e.*: what did hearing it aloud help you understand about what the essay is trying to say and how well it is saying it?).

This is an essay that's deceptively simple: it's short, and it's about you, so you can likely create a first draft quickly. But then it will be a matter of revising and honing as you work to make complex meaning in your essay; in fact, it may take several drafts and a lot of feedback from readers to help you discover and narrow the point you want to make, and more importantly, for you to make choices about what details can briefly convey meaning—you have so few words for this essay that every sentence counts.

You'll likely find that after you begin writing, your main idea will change and expand. Rather than how you may have written previous essays where you decide your main point and then find ways to show it, you'll be inquiring and figuring out what your point is as you draft the piece: you'll start from something that you find interesting and move toward your main idea, not the other way around.

Final Draft: 350-500 (up to two double-spaced pages), plus author's notes

First Draft Due	Thursday, September 1, 2016
Pencil Grade Draft Due	Thursday, September 8, 2016