

Essay Writing Guidelines

NPR Illinois invites you to contribute to this project by writing and submitting your own statement of personal belief. We understand how challenging this is—it requires such intimacy that no one else can do it for you. 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.

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.

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 (follows). 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.

The Original Invitation

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 in 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 Help, Inc.