

# This I Believe

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I believe in Wadhams! The hamlet of Wadhams! in upstate New York, is a mile from a sandy beach on Lake Champlain. The first time I drove there, I was greeted by the sign “Wadhams!” a happy, joy-filled greeting just outside the village. I’d never encountered such a merry sign anywhere else I’ve been—in this country or in Europe. Maybe it was the exclamation point; maybe it was the Dogwood Café and Bakery; maybe it was the plain neat and some not-so-neat houses that meant *good life* to me. I could see myself there, thinking to myself wouldn’t it be amazing to have a house in such a place—to live here? I’d be close to the lake and the Adirondack high peaks, living and being in my favorite place on earth. Wadhams means time to think and write, time to chat over café mocha. Wadhams means time for family, hikes, and paddles. It means living in and with nature—mountains and woods all around you every day. It has an effect.

One of the effects is that I thought my students\* needed a time and place to think and write about what they believe. There is little or no time for college students to ponder the intangibles of their lives, to contemplate the values and beliefs they have developed along the way. Few of them have ever put their beliefs into words and narrative. Putting their beliefs into language focuses them in a way that education,

math, and biology courses cannot. It hones their perceptions about who they are and how they fit into this life. To be a good teacher, to be a good anything, these young people must know who they are and what they believe. As their teacher, I hope knowing their beliefs will help them to live more happily and fully.

I look at this assignment as having a multitude of benefits—they learn how to write big and then small. They learn how to write long and then short. They learn how to show, not tell and to use metaphor in a way they probably have not done before. They use both sides of their brains because besides writing, they must include an audio and visual component with their essay.

I can’t take any credit for creating this assignment other than adding the audio/visual part. My dear friend and colleague, Dr. Barbara Bass, told me about it. It is based on the “This I Believe” series on the WNPR (National Public Radio). On the NPR web site, you can find a curriculum for teaching middle school, high school, and college students how to write these essays. The students really like it. We read the book, *This I Believe* and listen to other writers read their essays on the web site.

Barbara has her students write a list of what they believed when they were ten years old. They then choose one

that they still believe in the most or that encompasses most of their beliefs. We both work with using metaphors in our writing as well as using specific details. We begin with long drafts and then shorten them to 500 words. I have used this assignment for two semesters now and will use it again with some little changes next semester. I never do an assignment the same way twice.

Another added benefit is that you get to know who your students are, and this does not happen very often at a big university. I use this as our first assignment for that reason—we get to know one another and it helps in our creating a writing community. It’s amazing how well the other parts of the course fall into place—the presentations, the peer editing, the group work and the journaling all seem to be easier, smoother. And the students learn one another’s names—so often they walk into class on the first day knowing no one. Now they know one another after a few weeks and some develop real friendships –which is lovely to see.

If you would like to try this assignment in your class, go to <http://thisibelieve.org/educationoutreach.html>, or go to [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org) and type in This I Believe to hear thousands of archived essays.