

Suggested Outline for a Classroom Laws of Life Essay Contest

Note: These ideas can be used, with age-appropriate modifications, with grades 4-12

Step 1: Introducing the Contest

Stress the opportunities the contest provides: a chance for students to touch base with their values and ideals, improve their writing skills, and win prizes (if you plan to offer them). Next, give examples of laws of life found in students' personal experiences and beliefs, as well as examples from famous personalities or well-known literary characters. Briefly describe topics used by prior winners and explain that many of the essays were written by students who first thought they had nothing to write about. Emphasize teacher commitment to the contest and reassure students about the confidentiality of the contest. Finally, ask them to begin to think about their topics.

Use the following checklist to help you plan your introduction:

- ✓ Tell students what the contest is about.
- ✓ Explain how it will work in your classroom or school.
- ✓ Discuss benefits of contest: writing process practice, self reflection and expression, recognition/prizes, résumé enhancement.
- ✓ Describe the procedures that protect confidentiality.
- ✓ Inform students of the deadline.
- ✓ Announce the awards celebration.

Step 2: Prewriting activities: Helping students select a writing topic

There are many ways to help students select a topic for their essay. Some teachers give students a selection of quotes that students can use as the basis for their essay; others have conversations about what the "laws of life" are. Others connect the contest to an ongoing academic lesson. Whichever method you choose, make sure you explain that their responses are confidential, and they won't have to share unless they wish.

What are some of the Laws of Life students have written about?

Compassion

Honesty

Perseverance

Humility

Courage

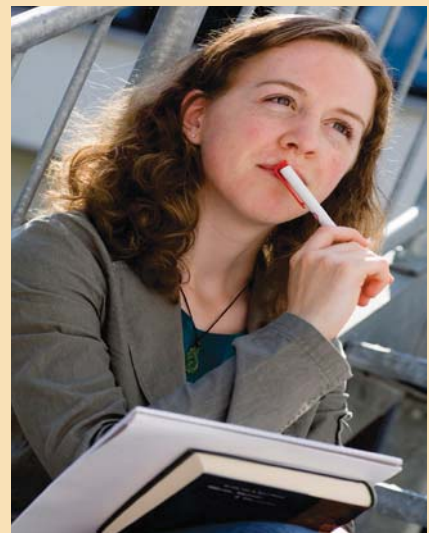
Forgiveness

Generosity

Purpose

Wisdom

Respect





TEACHER TIP: *Be sure to allow sufficient time between steps two and three to read your students' responses. (Each teacher knows the writing pace of his or her class.*

The following tips and resources may help you select a strategy that works for you:

- Distribute the student questionnaire (page 12) and tell students that it will help them identify their laws of life and possible topics. Allow sufficient time for completion; some students request extra time to complete the questionnaire at home. Look over their responses and mark those that might be used as a basis for their essays.
- Explain clearly the meaning behind the phrase laws of life. Some students may confuse legislative laws (e. g. seatbelt laws) with the laws of life that are found in all cultures, religions and traditions, (e. g. the respect for human life).
- Other activities to generate ideas or topics include journal entries, famous quotations, or short inspirational essays. The Foundation for a Better Life (www.values.com) is a rich resource of inspirational videos and quotes that could be used for this purpose.
- Point out examples of laws of life from current events or a recent reading assignment.
- Some teachers have students read essays written by previous winners, although some students may be tempted to copy the style and content of these essays. Hearing or reading prizewinning essays may also discourage less confident students. However, teachers often can describe general topics and experiences that have been discussed in previously submitted essays.
- Encourage students to use their personal experiences (either positive or negative) to generate ideas for their essays. Students use role models and historical or literary figure frequently to personify their laws of life.
- Discourage students from writing about their personal romantic relationships. Judges frequently view these essays as trite, and many times romances break up before the essays are judged!
- Encourage your students to discuss their essays with others throughout the writing process. Family members and peers can be a valuable resource.

Examples of maxims or quotes for writing prompts

There are numerous websites that offer quotes you can use as writing prompts; search for “quotes” or “inspirational quotes” to locate current websites. Character Counts offers a free curriculum for a maxim-based essay contest (“Foundations for Life”) which is similar to the *Laws of Life* at <http://charactercounts.org/programs/FFL/>.

Sample Maxims

- | | |
|---|--|
| “Honesty is the best policy.” | “Your attitude determines
your attitude.” |
| “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” | “To have a friend is to be a friend.” |
| “If at first you don’t succeed,
try, try again.” | “You are only as good as your word.” |
| “Life is the sum of your choices.” | |

Student Questionnaire

1. Who is someone that you admire? List three qualities that you admire about that person. What law(s) of life does that person demonstrate? How has that person influenced your life?
2. Describe an incident or event from which you learned a lesson "the hard way."
3. Describe a personal experience that has helped you develop your law(s) of life.
4. What could you change about yourself to become a better person?
5. Describe a time in your life when someone has helped you. How has this affected your law(s) of life?
6. What three qualities do you value in a friend, a teacher, a parent(s)?
7. Describe a situation in which you went out of your way to help someone else.
8. When you become a parent, what law(s) of life will you teach your children?
9. Has life been good to you? Explain.
10. Name three things for which you are thankful.

NOTE TO TEACHERS: This questionnaire is an effective tool to help students determine what they may want to write about in their essays. Select some or all of these questions to use with your students. Teachers have found that students are remarkably honest in their responses.



Using *UncommonSense*[™] as an essay prompt

The Better Business Bureau Center for Character Ethics uses the 20 principles of *UncommonSense* as the basis for its ethics programming. These principles can be used to spark discussion or as essay topics.

- Introduce *UncommonSense*. This might take several days and you may want to introduce only a few each day. Some will be familiar and easily understood, others may generate more discussion and require vocabulary development.
- Once the students have been introduced to each principle, discuss how they might be a topic for a *Laws of Life* essay. Can they relate it to a personal experience? Do they want to have friends who follow these principles? How well do they follow them themselves? Why are the *UncommonSense* principles important “*laws of life*?”
- Ask your students to take the “Honesty Self-Assessment.” Although they don’t have to share the results in class, relate the results to the *UncommonSense* preface “while I will never be perfect, I will strive towards...”
- Take other *UncommonSense* principles and have students write a similar self-assessment. This will help them expand their understanding of what each principle means and how it is translated to behavior.

Honesty Self- Assessment*

Instructions: Do you really know what honesty means? These questions are intended to stimulate your thinking and are confidential to you. By yourself, take 15 minutes to think about and truthfully respond to the questions below. How honest are you with others? What steps might you take toward greater honesty?

EXAGGERATION: Do you

- ___ Overstate the truth by using words like “always” and “never”
- ___ Make sweeping generalizations about people or situations
- ___ Overstate (or understate) the seriousness of a situation in order to make a point or to achieve a greater effect

FLATTERY: Do you

- ___ Give insincere praise
- ___ Compliment others to enhance your own reputation in their eyes

LYING: Do you

- ___ Slander— spread false reports about another with the intent to inflict hurt
- ___ Answer direct questions with untruths in order to protect your reputation
- ___ Falsify school assignments by using the work of others without giving them credit

MISLEADING: Do you

- ___ Leave a false impression (though your spoken words may be true)
- ___ Communicate facts selectively to influence others for your own purposes

INACCURACY: Do you

- ___ Fail to verify the facts before repeating a story
- ___ Fail to speak precisely or to make sure that your words are literally true

DECEPTION: Do you

- ___ Allow people to say things that are untrue about another person and imply consent by your silence
- ___ Attempt to create a better impression of yourself than is honestly true

HYPOCRISY: Do you

- ___ Praise others to their face while criticizing them behind their back

INCONSISTENCY: Do you

- ___ Flip-flop on issues depending on your audience

*adapted from “Honesty with Others: Spirit of Revival”, 1995)

UncommonSense® FRAMEWORK

“While I will never be perfect, I will strive towards...”

1. SEEKING WISDOM

I seek something greater than intelligence (knowing what is),
I seek wisdom, knowing what is right or true.

2. FIDELITY

I strive with courage to be who I say I am.

3. INTEGRITY

I strive to do what I say I will do.

4. COMPASSION FOR OTHERS

I strive to extend unmerited kindness to others as
an act of my will.

5. HONESTY

I strive to consistently speak the truth with compassion.

6. JUSTICE

I strive to uphold truth, expose error and correct wrongs.

7. ACCOUNTABILITY

I strive to self-scrutinize and seek the critique of others.

8. RESPECT

I strive to treat others as they would want to be treated.

9. PROMISE-KEEPING & TRUSTWORTHINESS

I strive to keep my word and my bond of relationship
with others.

10. EXCELLENCE

I strive to be my very best as I do my very best every day.

11. SERVING-LEADERSHIP

I strive to set the sacrificial example for others to follow.

12. UNITY

I strive to foster oneness among those to whom I am bound.

13. FORGIVENESS

I strive to extend and receive from others, unmerited acceptance.

14. HONORING AUTHORITY

I strive to yield to those given responsibility for others.

15. LIBERTY

I strive to preserve public rights by fulfilling my personal
responsibilities.

16. LEARNING & MENTORING

I strive to grow in wisdom and pass it on.

17. STEWARDSHIP

I strive to add value to all that has been entrusted to me.

18. SEEKING COUNSEL

I strive to overcome indecision and ignorance by securing
wisdom from others.

19. SUBMISSION TO TRUTH

I strive to courageously change my ways.

20. VALIDATING TRANSFORMATION

My renewed “inside” will reveal an increasingly renewed,
humble and hope-giving “outside.”

Persevering as a character-builder is the only thing that is truly 100% within our personal control. This means there is hope for personal change today that is not dependent on change in others or in our circumstances. Our conscience drives our convictions. These convictions generate courage and this courage drives our conduct, regardless of our past, our current circumstances, or even cultures or settings that are hostile to high character.

1169 Dublin Road / Columbus, Ohio 43215
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Connecting writing prompts to existing academic lesson plans

Writing prompts may also be connected to your established lesson plans. The School for Ethical Education (SEE) has developed numerous suggestions on how to connect *Laws of Life* essays with common middle and high school reading assignments. For example, students assigned to read *The Diary of Anne Frank* have written *Laws of Life* essays about Anne's perseverance, relating it to their own perseverance. Students involved in the study of Homer's *Odyssey* can write essays analyzing the character of Odysseus and what his "laws of life" were. On their website, SEE offers a complete lesson plan for using the *Laws of Life* with the study of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and other novels (see <http://ethicsed.org/programs/lawsoflife/index.htm>).

Things to keep in mind and teaching tips

- Prior to and during the time your students are writing their essays, familiarize them with the *laws of life* concept by integrating the term into your class discussions, assignments, and other activities.
- Have students write their essays in class whenever possible. Many teachers have commented that students are much more likely to complete their essays in an environment where help is immediately available.
- Allow time for students (who volunteer) to read aloud or exchange their working drafts. Teachers have commented that this process promotes understanding and empathy among their students.
- Consider providing extra credit (if the essay is optional) or a completion grade (if the essay is required) for students who hand in an essay.
- Remind your students that they are honor-bound to write their own essays. Some teachers have their students sign honor statements.
- Please do not betray the trust that students place in you. Your compassion, sensitivity and professionalism are essential.

Suggestions for encouraging and motivating students

- Many students write about sensitive and personal experiences. Students will be more inclined to share these experiences with teachers whom they have come to trust and respect.
- Reassure students about the confidentiality of the contest. Tell them that their names do not appear on their essays. Students feel freer to write about personal experiences when they are confident that their essays will remain anonymous – if they choose.



- Communicate to students that the essay is an opportunity for personal growth. The contest encourages students to examine and affirm their personal beliefs.
- Encourage all students to submit an essay. Many prizewinning essays have been written by students who first thought they did not have a topic worth exploring. Emphasize that prizewinning essays come from students of all abilities and ages, and participants do not have to be “A” students to be winners.
- Be flexible. Students of all abilities and levels can write meaningful essays. Individualize your expectations for each student.
- Encourage your students to ask for your help with their essays; however, be mindful of your involvement. Remember that the essays are being judged and awarded prizes for student writing.
- Be prepared to confer one-on-one with students who are having difficulty finding ideas for their essays. Some students may need a little prodding to arrive at a meaningful topic. Be patient. Each student has something to write and will be more apt to write honestly if he or she knows that it has value.

Note: Step 3 is for teachers who choose to have students write the essay in class or who are using the contest to teach or reinforce the writing process.

Step 3: Drafting the essay

TEACHER TIP: *Students should draft their essays electronically or write every other line for easy editing by teacher and peers.*

Discuss the opening paragraph

Having first made general comments about their responses, return questionnaires or other feedback from the pre-writing activities and reassure students that many of their peers have had similar feelings and experiences. Next, ask students to take notes on suggested types of introductions. Provide examples that reflect your own teaching style, explaining how each approach can be developed into an effective essay. Encourage them to decide on a topic. If time permits, offer conference time for individuals as needed before they begin writing. The following types of introductions are generally appropriate for a laws of life essay:

"It's not someone's appearance that really counts, it's what they have inside that matters. So my law of life is to make friends not because of anyone's looks or their clothes, but because of who they are."

- Avni, Age 12, India




"Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart."


-William Wordsworth



- Personal Anecdote or Example (“Although my brother is severely mentally retarded, he has been my teacher.”)
- Role Model Character Sketch (“My grandmother has taught me many things.”)
- Analogy (“Having a strong set of personal laws is like having a strong foundation for a new house.”)
- Direct Statement of Topic (“Having hope, faith, and charity in life...”, “Life is making stepping stones out of stumbling blocks.”)
- Commenting on a Story or Parable (e. g. The Boy who Cried Wolf; The Good Samaritan)
- Meaningful or memorable maxim or quotation – from a book or on-line source (see page 11 for suggestion)

 **TEACHER TIP:** *Contact your school librarian or media specialist for other suggestions, such as picture books, biographies, etc. that will offer a variety of resources.*

Have the students begin to write, using their student questionnaires or other pre-writing activity resources. Confer with students who are still undecided on a topic, using the resources in Step 2. Encourage each student to complete his or her introductory paragraph.

 **TEACHER TIP:** *Be patient. This may be the hardest step for some students. A winning idea may be born today in your classroom.*


Completing the supporting paragraphs

Review the use of transition and the mechanics for incorporating quotes. Suggest the following methods for developing the supporting paragraphs. Each supporting paragraph can:


- describe a different law,
- illustrate the importance of the same law in three different areas of a student’s life,
- be about three different experiences or famous individuals who exemplify a law,
- continue the development of an analogy.



Advanced students who are doing a philosophical treatment will not be limited to these methods of development. While students are writing, check completed introductions and work with students who need help. Ask students to complete their first supporting paragraph by the next planned writing time.



Briefly review any grammatical concepts you are teaching (pronouns, subject-verb agreement, punctuation, etc.). Ask students to check papers for errors. While they continue to work on their supporting paragraphs, circulate and help students on a one-on-one basis.



TEACHER TIP: *Point out grammatical and mechanical errors as you check; this significantly reduces errors on the rough draft.*

The concluding paragraph

Remind students that the concluding paragraph should parallel the introduction. Students can refer again to the role model, experience, or analogy mentioned in the introductory paragraph. They may wish to design a concluding or summary statement about each of the supporting paragraphs, or they may relate a quote to their topic. Remind students to be thinking of a title for their essays. Students write conclusions during the monitoring and editing phase. Continue to check for errors and offer suggestions.

Step 4: Peer Editing the Rough Draft

Students should understand that peer editing is an opportunity for them to improve their essays before the deadline; many times this exercise in student-to-student editing gives a great advantage to those who need positive reinforcement from peers. Peer editing allows students to share their experiences and feelings as well as their writing. At this point, many students want their friends to read their essays, encouraging conversation.

Give students the opportunity to work in small groups of their choosing (no more than three to a group) to proofread and edit each other's essays. Encourage every student to share his or her essay with a friend or classmate yet support the decision of those students who decide not to exchange their essays at this time. Because some papers may be about deeply personal subjects, not everyone will be willing to share; however, all should be encouraged. Respecting the wishes of students who do not want to have their essays read by other classmates will invite the students to reflect openly without concern of privacy violations and create trust between you and the student.

"I use the essay as a way to have a meaningful, one-on-one discussion with each of my students."

*- Jennifer Ralston,
English Teacher
Acton, Ontario*




Rules for constructive feedback

**Be Kind.
Be Specific.
Be Helpful.**

1) Start with a positive statement
"Your introduction was exciting."


2) Offer suggestions in a non-critical way
"Have you considered...?"

3) Helpful suggestions
"Can you explain this event more?"



Begin the peer editing process by handing out the “Peer Review Check List” on page 20. Review each question to make sure that the peer reviewers understand the kinds of “constructive feedback” (see box on page 18) they can provide to the essayist. Make sure all students understand and have practiced how to give and get constructive criticism.* Emphasize that reading the essay first without highlighting any errors will enable them to find out what the essayist is trying to tell the reader. Suggest that peer reviewers focus on and respond to the main ideas of the essay as well as mechanical errors.


Peer editors can correct and revise between the lines of the rough drafts. When they find an error or have a suggestion for improvement, ask them to circle it, put a question mark by it, or write a short note somewhere on the rough draft. Remind them to look carefully for errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, verb usage, pronoun case, and agreement.



TEACHER TIP: *Allow yourself plenty of time between steps 4 and 5 to check papers.*

Step 5: Writing the Final Draft

Return the rough drafts on which errors have been identified and general suggestions for improvement have been indicated. If available, have students complete their final copies electronically; if not have them handwrite the final draft in blue or black ink. Ask them to double space and to number the pages. Tell them to write on only one side of the paper. No name may appear anywhere on the final essay. Remind the students of the FINAL Contest deadline.



TEACHER TIP: *Ask students to hand in their essays 3-5 days before the actual contest deadline to avoid any late entries that would be disqualified.*

The Entry Form

Even if your contest is only within your classroom, using an entry form will make the contest more official – and give students practice filling out forms! A simple classroom entry form is provided on page 21. The Contest Manual (<http://lol.centerforcharacterethics.org>) has an entry form for larger multi-classroom or school or community contests.

Students complete the Entry Form, and if needed, have their parents or guardians sign the form. Attach the essays to entry forms securely. If you plan on having outside judges, you will need to give each essay

Tips for Extending Learning

- To extend learning from the peer editing experience, ask each peer editor to write a reflective piece (in a journal or as homework) about “what is one thing you learned from this essay?” By having students reflect on what they have learned about one of their classmates, you add to the opportunity for students to develop empathy and compassion.



- As the essays are being collected, invite an open discussion about the essay writing experience. Ask students to share what the experience has meant to them, and what they have learned about themselves and their peers from writing about their *Laws of Life*. Urge students to reflect on the ways in which writing about their values could impact their behavior and their relationships with others.

*For more information on how to create a culture of critique in your classroom, read *An Ethic of Excellence* by Ron Berger.

PEER REVIEW CHECKLIST

- ✓ _____ Is the content interesting and thoughtful?
- ✓ _____ Is the main idea clearly stated?
- ✓ _____ Is there enough supporting information?
- ✓ _____ Are the supporting paragraphs relevant and well-organized?
- ✓ _____ Are ideas connected by transitions and other linking devices?
- ✓ _____ Is the conclusion effective?
- ✓ _____ Are the sentences clear?
- ✓ _____ Are sentence length and structure varied?
- ✓ _____ Is the paper free of punctuation, spelling, and usage errors?
- ✓ _____ Is a Law of Life easy to identify?

Contest Entry Form

Essayist: Please complete the following form. Make sure your name appears only on this cover sheet and nowhere else on your essay.

Essay Title:.....

Essayist
first name:..... Last name:..... Grade:.....

Address:.....

Phone:.....

Email:.....

Which *Law(s) of Life* does your essay address?

By signing this form, you (and your parent or legal guardian if you are under 18) give.....

..... *Name of school* permission to use your essay and/or picture at their discretion

to publicize and promote the essay contest.

Please check one of the boxes below and sign

- If my essay is used in any way, you may include my full name with it
- If my essay is used in any way, you may not include my full name with it


This essay submitted is my original work: Please provide signature(s):

Essayist.....


Parent or guardian:.....

Teacher's use only: Essay Number.....

*for multi-classroom, school or community contests use the entry form in the Contest Manual, available at <http://lol.centerforcharacterethics.org>.



a code (numbers work fine), making sure to put the same code on the essay and entry form. Make enough copies so that you can keep an original copy, as well as one for each outside judge. If the student has an electronic copy, it is wise to have them turn that in also.



TEACHER TIP: Record comments from students to use as a resource for future writing activities. Some of the best criticism and affirmation of success comes from students.

Judging the Essays

As with every other step in the contest, there are several ways to judge the essays. The simplest is a rubric like the one in the box below. The rubric is similar to many school writing assessment tools, so if other teachers are assisting with judging, they would find this easiest to use. You will need to devise a procedure for tie-breaking, as there may be a number of “5’s”. This is especially important if you have a finite number of prizes you can award. One suggestion is to have a small committee of the judges discuss all the 5’s and select your winners.

Laws of Life Essay Judging Rubric

- 5 This positive and life-affirming essay clearly articulates a law of life which has universal appeal. The reader learns something compelling about life as the author has captured a value or ideal uniquely. The essay uses specific examples which encourage readers to both think and feel about the topic. The writer demonstrates stylistic maturity through effective command of sentence structure, diction, and organization. The essay need not be without flaws, but reveals an ability to choose from and control a wide range of elements of effective writing.
- 4 This essay also responds effectively to the laws of life but does so less fully or effectively than the essays in the top range. The development may be less thorough and less specific. This essay is well-written in an appropriate style but reveals less maturity and skill than the top essays. Some lapses in diction or syntax may occur, but writing demonstrates sufficient control over the elements of composition to present the writer’s ideas clearly.
- 3 This essay responds to the laws of life but the content may be imprecise, generalized, vague or less developed. This essay is adequately written, but may demonstrate inconsistent control over the elements of composition. Organization is attempted, but may not be fully realized or particularly effective.
- 2 This essay attempts to respond to a law of life but does so without support or specific evidence. The writing may show some understanding but reveals weak control over diction, syntax and organization. This essay may contain excessive and distracting errors in spelling and grammar. Statements are seldom supported with specific examples or persuasive evidence or quotations may replace supporting analysis.
- 1 This essay fails to respond adequately or discuss a law of life. The thinking may contain misunderstandings or confusion. This essay may be unacceptably brief or poorly written. Generally, this essay compounds the problems of lower scoring essays and distracts a reader from understanding the basic message of the essay.