

A spiral-bound notebook with a textured, golden-brown cover is shown from a top-down perspective. The spiral binding is on the left side.

A Teacher's Guide to the

Better Business Bureau

Laws *of* Life

Essay Contest





As simple as one teacher in one classroom...

The *Laws of Life* Essay Contest can...

- ♥ Help build relationships and positive school climate
- ♥ Help students develop empathy, compassion and self-confidence
- ♥ Provide an opportunity for self-reflection
- ♥ Meet language arts standards
- ♥ Provide practice for standardized tests or college entrance essays
- ♥ Give an authentic purpose for writing
- ♥ Provides a vehicle for parent and community involvement

"The contest has really improved the climate in my classroom and has helped me get to know my students for who they really are"

*-Teacher
Lima, Ohio*

The *Laws of Life* Essay Contest is endorsed by the
National Association of Secondary School Principals and the
National School Boards Association.

Letter to Teachers

Dear Colleagues,

From the moment I learned about the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest, I knew it was a special program. As a former classroom teacher, I knew this contest had the potential to bring students, teachers, parents and the community together in a very meaningful way. I tell everyone I meet that it is the best part of my work. For over a decade I have overseen the Ohio Statewide *Laws of Life* Essay Contest, and each year I am amazed at what students write about and what teachers tell me happens in their classrooms. *This contest has the potential to change lives* (see page 25 for examples). Many have told me it is cathartic for students to write about what they have overcome, others tell me that their students tell them no one has ever asked them what is important in life. And each year, the judges tell me how the essays they read have moved them — sometimes to tears, sometimes to laughter.

I promise you that holding a *Laws of Life* Essay contest in your classroom will be a rewarding experience for you, and for your students. It will help you get to know your students better, and will help your students get to know themselves better also.

As a result of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, the originators of the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest, the Better Business Bureau Center for Character Ethics is pleased to provide teachers, schools and communities with this *Guide* of suggestions and resources for holding a *Laws of Life* Essay Contest in your classroom, school or community. This *Guide* is designed for the classroom teacher using the contest as a classroom writing activity. There are suggested lessons, writing prompts and evaluation rubrics. We have also developed a companion *Contest Manual* for contest coordinators — everything you need to run a successful contest. We hope you will find these resources, and those on our website <http://lol.centerforcharacterethics.org> to be helpful.

Good luck with your contest — and remember — “Do what fits”!

Lucy Frontera

Lucy Frontera, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Ohio Partners in Character Education



Students and parents are proud of the recognition at a *Laws of Life* awards celebration.

The goal of the BBB *Laws of Life* Essay Contest program is:

“To encourage schools, youth organizations and communities to engage students in reflecting and writing about their own “*Laws of Life*”



Acknowledgements

This Teacher's Guide to the BBB *Laws of Life* Essay Contest was adapted from the Teacher's Guide published by the John Templeton Foundation, available on their website, www.lawsoflife.org. We have also drawn from Connecticut *Laws of Life* contest materials sponsored by the School for Ethical Education (www.ethicsed.org).

We would like to thank the following individuals for their contributions to this revised guide for their advice or contributions to the writing process:

Nancy Shew, middle school teacher
Westerville, Ohio

David Spencer, retired principal
Kent, Ohio

Liz Glenn, high school teacher
Westerville, Ohio

Kristina White, community liaison
Toledo, Ohio

This resource was made possible by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.





Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Do What Fits.....	4
About the Contest.....	5
Benefits of the Contest.....	7
Getting Started.....	8
Creating a Contest Timeline.....	9
Suggested Outline for a Classroom Laws of Life Essay Contest.....	10
Step 1: Introducing the Contest.....	10
Step 2: Prewriting activities: Helping students select a writing topic.....	10
Student Questionnaire.....	12
<i>UncommonSense</i> Framework.....	14
Step 3: Drafting the Essay.....	16
Step 4: Peer Editing the Rough Draft.....	18
Step 5: Writing the Final Draft.....	19
Peer Review Checklist.....	20
Sample Classroom Contest Entry Form.....	21
Judging the Essays.....	22
Laws of Life Essay Judging Rubric.....	22
Essay Scoring Form Worksheet.....	24
Sample Student Essays.....	25



Note to Teachers

Do What Fits!

From the beginning, the motto of the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest has been “Do what fits!”

There is no one right way to have a contest. Every school and classroom is different — and no one knows your classroom better than you. This guide highlights some of the strategies and activities that teachers have used to implement the contest. Find one that works for you and get started.

**The Power of One —
one teacher, one classroom
begins the creative process.**

*“Never doubt that a small group
of thoughtful, committed citizens
can change the world. Indeed, it
is the only thing that ever has.”*

—Margaret Mead



About the Contest

How did the contest get started?

In 1987, Sir John Templeton created the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest in his hometown of Winchester, Tennessee.

"I started the Laws of Life Essay Contest to encourage young people to think about their core values. The contest was a huge success, and is still ongoing to this day, for two reasons. First, the students are awarded prizes for their essays, which motivates almost all of the young people in the county to participate. Second, we don't tell the young people what to write about in their essays. We ask them to tell us. This is what the Laws of Life Essay Contest is all about: offering young people an opportunity to reflect and write about their principles."

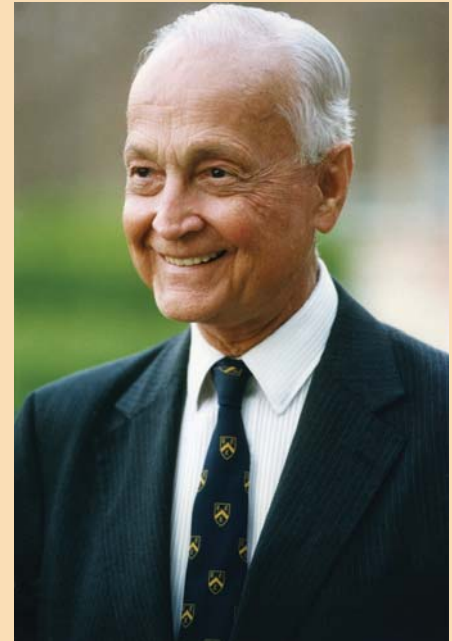
The contest was Sir John's way of giving back to the community that had given him so much

"As a young boy growing up in Franklin County, Tennessee, I was privileged to receive many lessons on good character at home and at school that were reinforced by the members of my community. Honesty, perseverance, gratitude, compassion: these are some of the many universal values — or laws of life — that I learned through the example of others. Through my own careful reflection, these values became the guideposts of my life."

Since then, the contest has spread throughout the United States and the world. Hundreds of thousands of students have written *laws of life* essays and thousands of schools, businesses, communities, colleges and universities and civic organizations have sponsored contests.

What are the Laws of Life?

The *laws of life* are the core values, ideals, and principles by which we live. Honesty, perseverance, good will to others, these are "laws" that transcend religions, cultures, and national borders. They are as universal and central to our lives as gravity. However, unlike the laws of gravity, each one of us must discover and practice the laws of life in order to benefit from them.



John Marks Templeton was born on November 29, 1912, in the small town of Winchester, Tennessee. He attended Yale University, supporting himself during the Depression and graduating in 1934 near the top of his class. Templeton started his Wall Street career in 1938 and went on to create some of the world's largest and most successful international investment funds. In 1999, Money magazine called him "arguably the greatest global stock picker of the century." In 1987, he was created a Knight Bachelor by Queen Elizabeth II for his many philanthropic accomplishments.

As a pioneer in both financial investment and philanthropy, the late Sir John Templeton spent a lifetime encouraging open-mindedness. If he had not sought new paths, he once said, "I would have been unable to attain so many goals." The motto that Sir John created for his Foundation,

*"How little we know,
how eager to learn,"*

exemplified his philosophy both in the financial markets and in his groundbreaking methods of philanthropy.



What is unique about this writing contest?

The *Laws of Life* Essay Contest invites young people to reflect on and express in their own words the ideals and principles that guide them: their philosophy of life. The contest requires students to identify their personal values through a challenging and engaging writing activity. Unlike other writing contests, judging focuses more on the thought processes and self-awareness of the writer and less on ability. This has allowed special needs and at-risk students to receive recognition for their essays, not always possible in typical essay contests.

How does the contest work?

No two contests are exactly alike, so the motto “do what fits” is appropriate. The contest has been used successfully with students at all levels, elementary through college level. Contests can be any size — from one teacher in one classroom to whole communities, regions or states. It can be a class assignment, or an extracurricular activity. There are however, several common components:

- Teachers learn how the contest works.
- Teachers introduce the contest to their students and encourage them to write an essay.
- Students turn in their essays by a deadline.
- Impartial judges read and rank the essays.
- The winners are recognized.

“I can’t say enough good things about this program! My students really get involved in their essays, and their enthusiasm makes a real difference in the quality of their writing.”

– Karyl Kelly,
English Teacher
Napa, California

Who sponsors Local *Laws of Life* Essay Contests?

In its simplest form, one teacher and one classroom can constitute a *Laws of Life* essay contest. There is no one “right” way to conduct a local contest. Contests can be sponsored by individuals, schools, businesses, civic or service organizations, church groups, youth organizations, foundations, colleges or universities, or communities — any group that cares about the character development of young people. In some communities, a business leader may decide to sponsor the contest and work with the local school district to implement it. In other cases, a concerned parent or teacher may “champion” the contest and persuade a community organization to get involved. The contest may or may not award prizes, although most include some form of student recognition.



What is the BBB *Laws of Life* Essay Contest?

The Better Business Bureau Center for Character Ethics has joined forces with the John Templeton Foundation to promote this enriching essay contest for youth. The BBB *Laws of Life* Essay Contest is one of the BBB Center’s premier “future workforce” programs — programs aimed at developing the character of today’s students so they become the ethical, responsible and trustworthy employees and citizens of tomorrow. The BBB Center for Character Ethics’ mission is



to provide exemplary programming that the 120+ Better Business Bureaus around the US and Canada can adopt in their areas. Some BBBs have already adopted the contest and sponsor regional contests for winners of local *Laws of Life* contests in their service area. The purpose of the regional contests is to encourage schools and communities to sponsor the local contests that create the character-rich dialogues and inspirational writing experiences for the youth in their area. To learn if your area BBB sponsors a regional contest go to <http://lol.centerforcharacterethics.org>.

Benefits of the Laws of Life Essay Contest

- ♥ Inspires young people of all ages to discover for themselves the core values, principles, and ideals that will guide them, wherever they go and whatever they do in life.
- ♥ Provides schools with an effective, easy-to-implement character-based program that gives students an authentic purpose for writing.
- ♥ Provides teachers with the opportunity to get to know their students better, improving classroom climate and relationships.
- ♥ Provides an opportunity for writing a “personal narrative,” a component of many state academic content standards.
- ♥ Provides practice for state, SAT, and ACT writing tests as well as college entrance essays.
- ♥ Builds stronger community — school ties by enabling educators and community members to work side by side on a positive and affirming activity.
- ♥ Encourages parents and children to talk about what really matters in life.
- ♥ Unlike other essay contests, the *Laws of Life* contest “winners” can be from all ability levels — and have frequently included special education or at-risk students.
- ♥ Recognition from winning a *Laws of Life* contest can be life-changing (see examples on pages 25–28).

Nancy Sizer, author of *Crossing the Stage: Redesigning Senior Year*, argues that it is critically important for adolescents to articulate (their moral) code. In the absence of an articulated code, they are easily pushed about by forces such as the peer group and popular culture. In order to be less susceptible to such influences, young people need to make explicit their own foundational values, or “laws of life”.

Lickona & Davidson,
2005,
Smart & Good
High School Report





How does the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest fit into a standards-based curriculum?

While many states have their own standards for the English/Language Arts curriculum, most are consistent with national standards or the “Common Core”. The *Laws of Life* Essay Contest complies with the Common Core, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) for English/Language Arts, and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) standards. For example:

“Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.” Common Core, English Language Arts, Writing, Text Types and Purposes, Grades 3–12

“Accomplished Adolescence and Young Adulthood/English Language Arts teachers develop and refine students’ abilities to write effectively and independently different types of texts for a variety of purposes and audiences.” Standard IX Writing, NBPTS Core Standards

NCTE Standards:

Standard 4: Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

Standard 5: Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

Standard 11: Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

Standard 12: Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Getting Started

How you conduct your contest depends on the answers to the following questions. Use this questionnaire to help you get started thinking about what you want to do.

- Will the essay be a class assignment or will it be voluntary (maybe for extra credit)?
- Will I involve other teachers/classrooms or just my classroom?
- How will I inform administrators and parents? What help or support will I need from them?
- Will I ask outside judges to read the finished essays? (other staff, local business people or community members)

Some teachers require all students to write a *Laws of Life* essay, but allow students to choose whether to enter their essay in the contest.

- How will I recognize students? (certificates, pat on the back, student recognition assembly, note to parents?)
- Will I offer prizes? If yes, where will I get them?
- How will students share their essays?

Once you have thought through these questions, you are ready to begin!



Creating a contest timeline

Some contests can be successfully held in one or two weeks, especially in small classrooms where the teacher is the sole judge. Most contests, however, will take a little longer. Much depends on whether you are having students write their essays in class, how much class time you are devoting to peer editing, and whether you are using outside judges. A sample timeline is presented below that allows about a month for students to write their essays and peer edit. Obviously this can be shortened if needed.

Allow a few days after the essay deadline to assign essay numbers and copy essays if you are using outside judges. A good rule of thumb is to give outside judges 10 days to 2 weeks to read their assigned essays, depending on how many you give them.

After you have received the judges scores, allow 2–3 days to total the scores and select the winners, especially if you have a larger number of essays.

Sample Contest Timeline

Contest Announced	February 1
Writing time, solicit judges	February 1–28
Essays due	March 1
Number, copy and distribute essays to judges	March 4
Judging	March 5–19
Judges scores due	March 19
Compile scores and select winners	March 20–23
Announce winners	March 24
Recognition celebration	March 31 (or end of year assemblies)

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

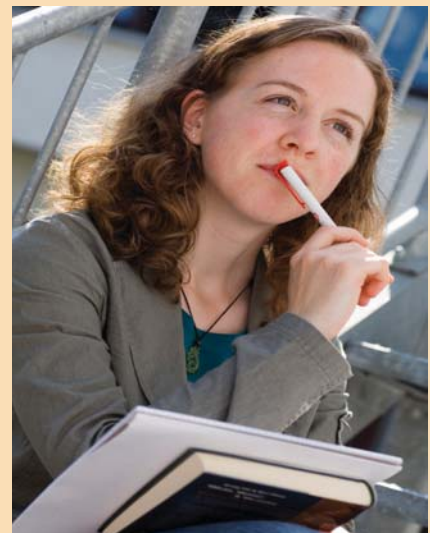
Forgiveness


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
centerforcharacterethics.org



The Center for
**Character
Ethics**



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

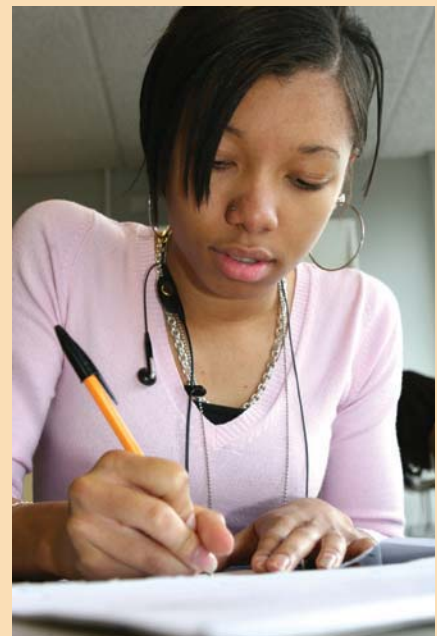
 **TEACHER TIP:** *Students should draft their essays electronically or write every other line for easy editing by teacher and peers.*

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.

Using Outside Judges

Essays can also be judged using a more detailed set of criteria. A sample essay scoring worksheet is on page 24. This system defines and assigns a point value to each important criterion, and is a preferable procedure if you are using outside judges who are not educators. It is simple to use and gives more information to use when selecting the contest winners.

When possible, have essays read by multiple readers and average the scores. It is also helpful to have each judge select the top 3–5 essays they read, which can also help “tie-break.”

**Remember,
DO WHAT FITS!**

Sources for outside judges

Local business people
Retired teachers
College instructors
Community leaders
State representatives
(Court) Judges
Lawyers
Retirees
Mayors, city council members



“These kids' stories put it all into perspective. A very worthwhile few hours of your time. I guarantee you will be moved.”

–Essay Contest judge

Essay Scoring Form Worksheet

Judges: Please use the following criteria and points to score each essay. When you have read all your assigned essays, please select the top 3 essays, and note on the bottom of the form if the essay is in your "top 3".

1. Compelling Content — the most important criteria

Score

Law of Life (score 1–5 with 5 being the best) Does the essay include a clearly articulated law of life or other moral message that would make the world a better place if everyone practiced it? Is the essay positive and life affirming and does it have universal appeal? Would most people agree that this is an important law of life?

Depth of Understanding (score 1–5 with 5 being the best) Did the essay make you both think and feel? Is there evidence of the author's self-reflection and genuine learning — does it capture an "epiphany" or a moment when the "light bulb went on"? Does the author relate their law of life to their experiences?

Originality (score 1–3 with 3 being the best) Did you learn something special and compelling about the author? Did the essay capture a value or ideal in a unique and special way? Was the essay moving?

2. Presentation, Grammar and Spelling — less important (1–3 points)

Is the essay easy to read? Is it clearly written? Were you able to tell exactly what the author was trying to share? Do ideas and paragraphs flow smoothly? Unless there are many glaring mistakes that suggest a sloppy and hurriedly written essay, proper grammar and spelling are less important criteria. Judges should determine to what extent poor grammar and spelling distract a reader from comprehending the basic message of the essay.

Total Score

Would you rank this essay as one of the top 3 essays you read? Yes No

Essay Number



Sample Essays

We have included several sample essays written by a variety of students. They are typical examples of winning essays for illustration only, but in each case the essay has had a significant impact on either the student's life or those around him or her. See the epilogues at the end of each essay to learn how winning the contest affected their life.

Although some teachers show sample essays to their students, it can often lead to student copying of style or theme, or be intimidating to less confident students. Use them at your discretion.

The Big Red Tool Box

Cody, junior,
Lima, OH

As a little boy, I used to go to my grandparents' house. Each visit, I'd look forward to my trips out to my grandfather's workshop where I'd get to see his "pride and joy," his big red tool box. He told me how he had started with a little hand-held container. He explained how over the course of several years he had added to his collection of tools and increased the size of his tool box to what now stands over five feet tall. It was big, red, and shiny.

"It's not the size of the box that matters," Grandpa would say, "It's the tools inside that get the job done. It's how you use them."

Grandpa taught me a lot about tools and how to use them. As I list some of the tools and what they are used for, I think of how God has given me tools to use in my everyday life. Here is my list:

- 1) Wood – a hard substance used for building. Wood represents my faith, my belief in God. My faith is the foundation on which I build my life.
- 2) Nails – slender pieces of metal having a point and a head, used for fastening pieces together. Nails represent the small pieces of knowledge and intellect I acquire from all walks of life. It is all these different thoughts and ideas that give me my individuality.
- 3) Hammer – a hand implement used for driving nails, striking, or pounding. The hammer represents in me a strength, a strong inner strength that allows me to form my own opinions and stand my ground.
- 4) Saw – a cutting instrument with pointed teeth used to cut or divide. The saw has an angry look. Its sharp teeth compare to the evils of the world. There are many temptations awaiting me. I must use common sense and make good, smart decisions to divide myself from these evils.
- 5) Chisel – a cutting tool with a beveled edge used for cutting, engraving, or chipping away at wood or metal. I have set goals for myself. I must use the chisel to chip away at any obstacles that may get in my way. I will use the chisel to engrave my name and leave my mark on the world.



6) Screwdriver – a tool used to turn or change. Like the screwdriver, I too can turn. I can change. I must always keep an open mind and be open to change.

7) Level – A device for adjusting something to a horizontal line by noting the position of a bubble contained in a sealed tube. I, like the level, must maintain a balance in my life. I realize I am created equal to all others, none of us being more important than another. While I believe each of us is put on this Earth for a reason, it is my desire to find my purpose in life and to play my role to the best of my ability.

8) Flashlight – a small portable light used for seeing in the dark. My flashlight-my eyes-my windows to the world. May I wake up each morning eager to learn. May I always hunger to make new friends, and may I enjoy the smiles of others I bestow acts of kindness on.

Individually, each of these tools can serve a purpose, they can get the job done. Together, however, they can build a mansion, perhaps even a city.

These characteristics, individually, can bring someone great joy. But all of these characteristics, these laws of life, together can bring a lifetime of peace, love, and happiness.

You know, looking back on all those trips to Grandpa's workshop. I realized he wasn't just teaching me about tool boxes and tools, he was teaching lessons far more valuable. I hope the next time he tells his story, his "pride and joy" will be over six feet tall, and I won't be red and shiny.

Epilogue: *Cody's essay, written in 2002, caught the eye of James Gallagher, a vice president with AMEC Construction Management, a general contracting company working to rebuild part of the Pentagon destroyed in the 9/11 attacks. Gallagher distributed Cody's essay to subcontractors and placed it on the bulletin board at the site. He wrote Cody to tell him that Cody's name would be included on a memorial stone at the Pentagon along with the others who worked on the project. "Your essay was enjoyed and appreciated by all who have read it here at the Phoenix Project," the letter read. "I am positive you have only begun to leave your mark on the world." Gallagher said the toolbox and carpentry analogy was something he and others on the site could relate to, adding that the inspirational message has really helped them. "They have been working around the clock, and the essay makes them reflect that there is a bigger purpose in life."*

My Life's Advice

Jeff, 8th grade
Kent, Ohio

If I could offer the world a piece of advice it would be you are your attitude. Your attitude not only affects you but it affects the world around you. You should try to stay positive.

I am currently a fourteen year old visually impaired student. My eye condition is caused by a defective gene in the retina and optic nerve which causes me to not see as well as some people, but I can still see a little. I have to learn how to do things a little different than most other people and it is sometimes challenging. For example I have learned to read in braille



and walk with a white cane. I am now quite good at both. It just so happens that because of not being able to see made me want to succeed even more than I probably would have without my disability. Also, I have developed my own way of looking at life. It can be challenging being the only one in my grade with a visual impairment. I couldn't have accomplished all that I have in school and out of school without my positive attitude.

From my experience I have found that there are two main ways you can live your life, both deal with your attitude. The first way is the one I try to avoid. It is to swim in the sea which is your own self pity and cut your life line out of the water. In this way you let everything that is bad in your life crush you into a hole you eventually will not be able to get out of. In a sense it controls your every action. You constantly are feeling sorry for yourself and how nothing goes your way. You don't enjoy your life as you might. It also affects everyone around you because you are unpleasant and not easy to talk to.

The second way is to raise yourself above your feelings of self pity. This is not easy because life has its ups and down. Your life is like a wave with many crests and troughs. You go up and down. The challenge is to ride the way onward and not crash back into despair that will plague you. I have had many bad experiences and sometimes I wish that the world would just let me go, and I wonder why I was put on this world if I have to go through this. I try to answer myself that my life isn't that bad. I have a loving family and my determination to succeed. I was always taught that no matter how bad you think your life is there is always someone who is worse off. So I pull myself back out of my sorrow and go on. In a sense you just have to let things go and move on with your life.

For example, if I can't play a sport others are playing I sometimes get frustrated and angry because I feel stupid or left out because I can't do what everyone else is doing. Most of the time I suppress my feelings and say to myself I will either find a different way for me to do this or this activity is not for me. There is no sense beating my head against a brick wall I would only hurt myself. Like I've said before not everything goes right, there are things that I just can not let blow by me. The thing that bothers me most is people making fun of me. It just makes me mad when someone says, how many fingers are they holding up or other insulting actions or words. I have also had people wave their hands in my face and ask me if I can see their hands. I remember one time this one kid was really irritating me. He was waving his hand in my face and kept asking me how many fingers he was holding up. I completely went nuts, I got right up in his face and started asking how he would feel if he were in my position. As I have grown up and matured I have learned to let go most of the negative things that people say to me. I have come up with some smart comments to their negative words such as "You don't know how many fingers you're holding up? So you need to ask someone else. Gee you must really need some help." I only have one time to live this life of mine so I should make the best of it. So should everyone else. As a group we should try to have a good attitude and the world would be a better place. Also we should be friendly to everyone.

Life is a battle being constantly fought sometimes a struggle sometimes there is a lull. This helps us realize the good things in our lives. If we just had good times we wouldn't know they were good. So it should be fought with a smile on our faces. So think positive or at least try because its good for you, the people around you, and everyone in general.

Epilogue: *When Jeff's essay appeared in the newspaper, a local businessman was so impressed with the essay that he invited Jeff and his family to attend a retreat he was having for his employees. He asked Jeff to read the essay to his employees, hoping it would inspire them.*



The Past, the Present and the Future

Angela, high school junior

Marion, Ohio

Life is like the world of work to me, because you never know what will happen next. Something bad could happen today. The world could be gone tomorrow. The sun is like the light at the end of the tunnel after something bad happens. Life is like when something is bobbing on the water, it can go underneath or stay afloat. Because life is unpredictable, my Law of Life is: take it one day at a time.

Worrying about the past is useful if it teaches you not to make the same mistakes over again. However, worrying about things you cannot change is useless. Worry is wasted if it cannot change anything. Worrying about things you cannot change also keeps you from going into the future. If something bad happens and it cannot be change some people hold on to the past forever. They hold on to the past instead of going into the future. They are scared of the future.

Just like worrying about the past can be useless, worrying about the future can be useless also. Energy used in over-examining yourself and worrying about the future is energy that could be used for thinking about now. This energy used worrying could be used for positive things like writing poems, reading books and hanging out with good friends.

Thinking about the future, however, is useful because you can stay one step ahead and think about the consequences. For example, I do not smoke because I know the consequences. When I was about 12, my brother stole one of my father's cigarettes and dared me to smoke it. Because I know the consequences of smoking, I chose not to join my brother I'm glad I followed my heart. My brother was caught and punished. Because I chose not to join him, I was let go with a warning. I obey the rules at my school because I want to finish my education and graduate. I will be the first female in my family to graduate from high school. To achieve this honor, I must plan for my future, but not worry about it.

Taking one day at a time is my philosophy of life — it is my law of life. I don't worry about the past. I can't change it, I can only learn from it. I can't change the future but I can look forward to it and plan for it. Each day you live you should live to the fullest.

Epilogue: *Angela's teacher told us that winning the Laws of Life contest made a tremendous impact on her life. Angela, an at-risk student, gained self-confidence and accomplished her dream of being the first female in her family to graduate from high school.*

Our Vision:

The vision of the Better Business Bureau is an ethical marketplace where buyers and sellers can trust each other. To advance this vision, BBB endeavors to create a community of trustworthy businesses by setting high standards for business practice, encouraging and supporting those best practices, celebrating marketplace role models, and denouncing substandard marketplace behavior.

BBB Accreditation is an honor — and not every company is eligible. Businesses that meet our high standards are invited to join BBB. All BBB accredited businesses have agreed to live up to our Standards for Trust, a comprehensive set of policies, procedures and best practices focused on how businesses should treat the public — fairly and honestly in all circumstances.



Our “Laws of Life”:

Excellence: Strive to do our very best. Be accountable to the general public, our members, and to each other for everything we do. Commit to providing the highest quality service with excellence and consistency everywhere we operate.

Integrity: Be honest and ethical in all of our business activities. Treat everyone with integrity, keeping our promises and learning from our mistakes. Have the courage to hold fast to our professional convictions.

Teamwork: Communicate, cooperate and collaborate freely across organizational and territorial boundaries, and work as one team to fulfill our mission.

Trust: Trust in our colleagues throughout the BBB system and in ourselves. Say what we mean and mean what we say. Communicate with honesty and candor.

Respect: Treat everyone with respect and dignity, valuing individual and cultural differences. People are our fundamental asset. We will empower them to develop and use their talents and capabilities to the fullest.



BBB Center for Character Ethics

The BBB Center for Character Ethics is a powerful working collaboration of like-minded experts and organizations dedicated to increasing marketplace trust by providing practical character ethics and ethical habits training for leaders and educators, serving our current and future workforces. The Center’s programming for the current and future workforce is directed toward helping individuals and organizations be more intentional about putting ethics to work. The 20 principles of *UncommonSense™* (see page 14) form the basis of the Center’s work — their “*laws of life*”.



Writing from the heart

Better Business Bureau

Laws  **Life**
Essay Contest

Presented by

On the web at <http://lol.centerforcharacterethics.org>