

Teaching Tips

Encouraging and motivating your 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 so choose. (A sample entry form designed to protect confidentiality is reprinted on page 21.)
- Communicate to students that the essay is not an academic assignment; instead, stress 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 had nothing to write about. Stress that prizewinning essays come from students of all abilities and ages, and participants do not have to be a poet laureate to be a winner.
- 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.
- Be prepared to confer one-on-one with students who are having difficulty coming up with ideas for their essays. Some students may need a little prodding to arrive at a meaningful topic. Be patient!

Teaching Tips – continued

Helping your students decide on their topics

- Explain clearly the meaning behind the phrase *laws of life*. Some students may confuse legislative laws (e.g., seat belt laws) with the *laws of life* that are found in many cultures, religions, and traditions (e.g., the respect for human life).
- Before students begin to write their essays, use warm-up activities to generate ideas or topics. Activities that teachers often use include journal entries, famous quotations, short inspirational essays, and surveys/questionnaires. (See page 20 for a sample questionnaire.)
- Avoid reading essays written by previous winners. 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 can describe general topics and experiences that have been discussed in previous essays.
- Encourage students to use their personal experiences (either positive or negative) to generate ideas for their essays. Role models and historical or literary figures are also frequently used by students to personify their *laws of life*.
- Discourage students from writing about their personal romantic relationships. These essays are frequently viewed by contest judges as trite and full of hyperbole. (Furthermore, the “couple” usually breaks up before the winning essays are announced!)
- Encourage your students to discuss their essays with others throughout the writing process. Family members and peers can be a valuable resource.



Integrating the essay into your teaching strategies

- 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. There are always those “teachable moments” in which you may be able to recognize students or other people who exemplify a *law of life*.
- 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. Students discuss personal experiences with their teachers in confidence. Your compassion, sensitivity, and professionalism are essential.



"Of all the qualities and beliefs that my grandfather embedded in me, one stands out. My grandfather fought cancer for nine years and never once was negative. Although at times he was afraid, he never gave up . . . I believe that never giving up is the greatest law of life."

Heather, Age 17, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

"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, Bombay, India

