As 8th graders began their writer’s workshop journey into Personal Essay, they had to ask themselves: what do I believe in? What are my main cores and values? What is my life philosophy? This seemed a daunting task. Most adults can’t even answer this question.

1. **Students collect ideas**
   Students maintained a writer’s notebook where they collected ideas from in class quick-writes, old photographs, objects, interviews with family members, and talking to their friends in order to collect a notebook of ideas that held some keys to their inner life philosophies.

2. **Students immerse themselves with mentor texts.**
   Students analyzed and immersed themselves in several "This I Believe" essays from NPR’s sister website www.thisibelieve.org. Students analyzed the structure, vocabulary, use of rhetorical questions, tone, style, and most important...voice. Students asked themselves "How do I put my own personality in my writing while still maintaining a formal style?"

Listen to a podcast of a student’s essay here: [https://www.sanjuan.edu/files/168334/english.mp3](https://www.sanjuan.edu/files/168334/english.mp3)

3. **Students draft.**
   Once students started formulating ideas about their core beliefs, they began to draft and then read their drafts to their writing groups. Peer talk and evaluation is essential, as verbally processing ideas is the key to refining and organizing our thoughts.

4. **Students draft...again.**
   All students produced at least 5 drafts of their essays, revising and adding mentor lines, stronger vocabulary, writer’s craft, and deeper analysis along the way.

5. **Students podcasted.**
   Students learned that the best tool to refining an essay is to read it out loud. Podcasting became one venue where students could formally publish their essays, and "tweak" their thoughts along the way.

6. **Celebration!**
   Students celebrate their essays at the end of the unit. We read, praise, listen, honor talent and hard work...and eat cookies!!!