



Language Arts My Credo

CA LANGUAGE ARTS CONTENT STANDARDS
LISTENING AND SPEAKING STRATEGIES, GRADES
9,10: 1.1 Formulate judgements about the ideas under discussion and support those judgements with convincing evidence.
1.10 Analyze historically significant speeches to find rhetorical devices and features that make them memorable. 1.11 Assess how language and delivery affect the mood and tone of the oral communication and make an impact on the audience.

Overview

Students will read excerpts from the lives and works of naturalists Henry David Thoreau and David Brower, then write about and share their own beliefs regarding wilderness, technology, progress, success and independent thinking. Subsequently, students will craft and perform their own creeds, which will be based upon their earlier musings.

Reference Terrain poem by David Ross Brower, "Credo," pg. 7.

David Brower was considered one of the most influential conservationist of the last 50 years. A tireless writer, speaker, and organizer, he was largely responsible for saving many of our country's most illustrious wild places from development and ruin: Point Reyes, Redwood National Park, Dinosaur National Park, the Grand Canyon.

The writer **Henry David Thoreau**, who was born nearly 100 years before Brower, is considered by many the father of the American conservation movement. His writings have inspired generations of environmentalists and social justice activists, including Rachel Carson and Mahatma Ghandi. Both Brower and Thoreau were vocal critics of American society. But closer to the bone, both shared an intense fascination with nature and wilderness. Their speeches and writings are rife with passages like the ones below:

"Take a bird's feather, for instance. I just marvel at that structure—the hairs, the spacing, the pattern. It's a very nice bit of design, enabling it to fly, to handle temperature changes. Or look at beetles. Did you realize there's a beetle that can produce steam to fire at enemies? There's a clam that can manufacture cement at the temperature of seawater. What's the trick? We have no idea. If we found out, we might pave everything in sight." (*Outside magazine*, Dec. '95)



"One day when I went out to my woodpile, or rather my pile of stumps, I observed two large ants, the one red, the other much larger, nearly half an inch long, and black, fiercely contending with each other. Having once got hold they never let go, but struggled and wrestled and rolled on the chips incessantly. Looking farther, I was surprised to find that the chips were covered with such combatants, that it was not a duellum, but a bellum, a war between two races of ants..." (*Walden*, pg. 185)





Activity

The two parts of this activity are linked. In Part A, students contemplate their own value systems as they pertain to wilderness, technology, progress, success, and independent thinking. In Part B, students use those reflections as a basis for writing their own creeds.

Part A: Questions for Reflection

Read the following questions, reflect, then write a paragraph for each of the five groupings of questions. After you have written down your thoughts, discuss your answers with a fellow student for ten minutes. Note where your ideas overlap with his/her ideas and where they differ.

1. "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind," wrote Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*. By living as simply as possible, and fishing and growing his own food, Thoreau could earn all his living expenses by working a total of six weeks per year. He believed that most people wrongly equated their value with their possessions.

In *Credo*, Brower hopes that humankind "may see that progress is not... the growing number of things we possess and cling to..." While Brower was largely unconcerned with accumulating possessions himself, he did enjoy certain luxuries: "Brower loves restaurants," wrote Daniel Coyle in *Outside* magazine, "particularly fifties-era seafood-and-steak joints with studded-leather booths and bartenders who know his preferences—Tanqueray martinis straight up, no distractions."

— How are progress and success measured in the culture(s) in which you live? Explain why you agree/disagree with those standards for measuring progress or success. If you removed yourself from society and lived alone in the wilderness for six months, how do you think your values would change?

2. Thoreau was born in 1817, Brower in 1912. Imagine that 100 years from Brower's birth, in 2012, a child is born who will become a prominent naturalist writer or speaker midway through the century we've just begun.

— Considering the modern trends of urbanization and deforestation, how likely is it that a future naturalist writer or speaker will have close access to wilderness midway through this century? Do you believe that a person must spend a significant amount of time in wilderness for him/her to value the preservation of wild places highly, as Brower and Thoreau did?

3. While Thoreau was an inventor and engineer of sorts (he

invented a machine to grind pencil lead into powder for a smooth line), he had mixed feelings about the technology of his day. "Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things," he wrote in *Walden*. "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."

Brower, whose home in Berkeley once held 11 telephones, a fax machine, a typewriter, a laser printer, and a PowerBook, believed that the new communications technologies could aid in the efforts to preserve wilderness. During the 1960's, he helped to produce coffee table books for the Sierra Club. "We were getting people to fall in love with the Earth," he said of the books, which contained poetry and dynamic photographs of the wild. "We need to concentrate on that once again, whether it's on e-mail, on the web, through the media, wherever we can get it." (*California Wild*, Winter '01)

— Do you believe our culture's push to develop new technology is driven by utility (usefulness) or a love of novelty (newness)? To what extent do you believe technology has improved your life and/or made you happier?

4. "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer," wrote Thoreau. "Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." In his essay "Civil Disobedience," which influenced both Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr., Thoreau expressed his belief that an individual must determine what is right from wrong, independent of the dictates of society. Exercising his beliefs, Thoreau refused to pay the poll tax which financed the war with Mexico and supported the enforcement of slavery laws.

In the 1960s, Brower agreed to a deal with the federal government that allowed construction of a dam that flooded Arizona's Glen Canyon in order to keep two dams from deluging the Grand Canyon. It was a decision that would haunt him until his death. He vowed never again to compromise. Later, his activism and reluctance to compromise resulted in the Sierra Club losing its tax-exempt status. He was forced to resign from the Sierra Club. "Prickly and single-minded, Brower seems always to move too fast, want too much, push too hard. His sense of mission comes before allegiances, before friendship and family, before everyday comfort and affection," wrote Daniel Coyle. (*Outside*, Dec. '95)

— Do you believe that time spent alone in wilderness leads a person to have a more independent spirit—one unconcerned with popular opinion? Why? What are the benefits and drawbacks to asserting your independent beliefs in our culture?

Continued on next page.



5. David Brower grew up in the Berkeley Hills, an area which was virtually wilderness at the time. He would go on long walks near Grizzly Peak, sometimes leading his mother by the hand. Because she was blind, Brower would describe the plants and animals and terrain to her as they moved along. When his father lost his job, the family fell on hard times. For cheap recreation, they turned to camping, driving the tortuous dirt roads to the wild country at the south end of Lake Tahoe, which today features casinos, gas stations, hotels, restaurants and real estate offices.

Thoreau grew up in Concord, Massachusetts, where he explored the surrounding woods (and once, accidentally, set fire to 300 acres.) At the age of 27, Thoreau built a ten-by-fifteen foot cabin of pine logs and secondhand boards where he lived for two years. There, he wrote his most well-known book, *Walden* (or *Life in the Woods*).

— Do you believe that a person's childhood surroundings play an important role in what a person comes to value as an adult? What aspects of your own childhood have led to the specific values/beliefs you hold now?

Part B: Writing Your Creed

A credo, or creed, is a formal summary of one's beliefs, an authoritative statement of that which is held true by a person, sect or school. Whether it takes the form of a poem, an inauguration speech, or a rap, a creed is most powerful when presented orally. Martin Luther King's famously inspirational "I have a dream" speech contains a creed within a creed: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'" Credos frequently use the first person plural pronouns *we*, *us* and *our*, and are meant to be lasting documents, a means by which future generations may understand our beliefs and intentions.

Exercise

1. Select some of your favorite thoughts from questions 1.-5. Use them to write a credo that is a summary of those ideas you value or hold true.
2. Read or perform your credo before the class.

Sample Works Which May Be Considered Creeds:

Pulitzer prize-winning author and activist **Alice Walker** included this poem in the commencement speech she gave at Spelman College, entitled "*What Can I Give My Daughters, Who Are Brave?*"

We Alone

We alone can devalue gold
by not caring
if it falls or rises
in the marketplace.

Wherever there is gold
there is a chain, you know,
and if your chain
is gold
so much the worse
for you.

Feathers, shells,
and sea-shaped stones
are all as rare.

This could be our revolution:
To love what is plentiful
as much as
what is scarce.



"Bloodsong" by Eric Drooker, from *Street Posters and Ballads*, Seven Stories Press, 1998.

Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, **Nelson Mandela** led the struggle in South Africa against apartheid. He was imprisoned for over twenty years, after which he became the first democratically-elected State President of South Africa.

Speech By Nelson Mandela

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful
beyond measure.

It is our Light, not our Darkness,
that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,
talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God. Your playing small
does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that
others people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God
that is within us.

It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone.

And as we let our own Light shine, we unconsciously
give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our
presence automatically liberates others.