

# WRITING LESSON

# LETTING GO OF WORRY



In the YES! online article **Life After Worry**, Akaya Windwood shares that worrying never changed the outcome of whatever she worried about. She discovers that when she replaces worry with trust she can be more present for her sister who has MS. And her friends, co-workers, and family find her more clear-headed, creative, and strong.

Students will use Akaya Windwood's article to write about a worry they would like to throw away, and what they might gain by replacing worry with something more worthwhile.

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## Life After Worry

A few years ago, Akaya Windwood made a decision not to worry. Ever. So how's that working out for her?



What else could we do with all of the energy we put into worrying? Photo by Charlotte Gonzalez, Flickr.

### By Akaya Windwood

*Reprinted from YES! online, June 15, 2010*

THERE'S A LOT TO BE WORRIED ABOUT THESE DAYS, WHAT WITH GULFS DROWNING IN OIL, ECONOMIES FAILING, RACIAL PROFILING, ETC. Just one glance of any newspaper will offer plenty of fodder for worry. Perhaps you have some very personal worries about your family, finances, or organizational survival.

A number of years ago, my sister was diagnosed with MS. As you might imagine, that was a very scary time for our family. While we were trying to figure out how to best meet her changing needs, I was in touch with her often. I remember a week

when I'd been traveling, when we'd not talked for several days, and I called her saying: "I've been worried about you! How are things going?"

To my surprise, she bristled and said, "Please don't worry about me. You can pray, or send me good wishes or think about me, but worry doesn't help—in fact, it makes it harder for me." I was stunned. Here I was, trying to tell her how much I cared, and she got short with me.

And then I thought about it.

My sister was right. There was no way

that my negative cloud of worry could have been beneficial to her, even if my intentions were good. As I further considered what she'd said, I realized that worry had never changed the outcome of whatever I was worried about. Not once. The only thing worry did was to affect how I felt and experienced what was happening. And it never made me feel better. Not once.

My sister is very wise.

So, I made a decision not to worry. Ever. I began to understand that it was a habit of my mind. My heart doesn't worry, my body doesn't

**But it wasn't enough to just not worry; I needed to replace the habit of worry with something else, and I chose trust.**

worry, only my head does. I chose to establish a new habit of consideration and trust—trust that people are tremendously resilient and that the universe could operate without my constant nagging interference. But it wasn't enough to just not worry; I needed to replace the habit of worry with something else, and I chose trust.

Much to my surprise, I found that not worrying increased my capacity to attend to what was in front of me. All that energy I'd been using to worry was freed up for me to use in much more creative and interesting ways—like helping to change the world.

I also found that I was much more available for my sister. That was the biggest gift.

As leaders, it is important to notice how we spend our time, and to take responsibility for the impact we have on others. Our worry affects those around us, even when we think we are “managing” it well.

When I stopped worrying, it made a big difference in how I showed up in meetings, to my partner, and with my friends and family. I had a clearer head because it wasn't all fogged up with rat-in-the-wheel worry. I became much more effective. And people noticed.

I invite you to take a moment and consider your relationship to worry.

- What does it represent to you? Caring? Love? Attentiveness? Something else?
- How might you care for, love and attend to those around you without bringing a cloud of worry?
- If you chose not to worry, what might change in your life? What might get freed up?
- With what might you replace the worry? Compassion? Trust? Meditation?

There's a saying that worry is a prayer invoking that which we don't want. Imagine what could happen if instead of focusing on worst-case scenarios and fears, we put our attention on what we deeply desire and are working toward?

A movement of worried leaders is dreadful to imagine. A movement of purposeful, visionary, mentally and emotionally clear leaders is exhilarating!

In the coming years, we are going to need leaders who are of clear heart, vision, and mind. Leading from a place of clarity rather than worry could be one of our greatest tools. It frees us to be increasingly creative, inspirational, and effective.

So let's not worry. Let's be caring and concerned about our world, clear in our purposes, strong in our visions, and willing to act.

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**Akaya Windwood** is president of the Rockwood Leadership Program in Berkeley, California. She is known nationally for her commitment to social and economic justice, and to building a new and compelling vision for effectiveness and collaboration in the non-profit sector

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## Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Think of the things you worry about. What is one worry you'd like to throw away? What would you replace your worry with, and what would you—and possibly those around you—gain by not having that worry in your life?

## Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

### **How did this lesson work for you and your students?**

Share your feedback with us and other teachers  
by leaving a comment on our website:

[www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/letting-go-of-worry](http://www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/letting-go-of-worry)

## Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Focus on topic</b>	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
<b>Organization</b>	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
<b>Originality and strength of ideas</b>	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
<b>Evidence and/or reasoning</b>	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
<b>Command of grammar and conventions</b>	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
<b>Voice</b>	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

\* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

## Part 5: Sample Essays

# I'm Only 12

By Margaret O'Neil, Grade 6

I'm only 12 years old. I'm only in sixth grade, can only do so many things with my life at this age. But there is one thing I can do that most anyone can do—worry.

Money, popularity, family, what other people think—these are things that cloud many people's heads and hearts. No one but you can stop it. And, reality is, if you are like everyone else and worry about things in your life, that's probably the last thing you want to hear.

This past summer was probably the worst 92 days of my life. I discovered that my parents were planning to get divorced, I developed anxiety and panic attacks, and on top of it all, I wasn't allowed to tell anyone—not even my own siblings. All those nights where I begged my mom to stay with my dad, all those nights when I went to sleep sad but feeling relieved that I wouldn't have nightmares (because it pretty much felt like I was living in one), my mom would always say one of two things: One, it isn't your fault, or two, only you can get those worries out of your head.

Those words of wisdom, no matter how many times I scowled or simply kept on bawling, were completely and utterly true, even if applied to the most twisted and complicated worry you could possibly think of.

Worrying is, in fact, inevitable. Everyone does it at some point in their life, no matter how big or small. It's never your fault. Ever.

And the only way to quiet the voices that are constantly provoking treacherous questions that rack your mind is to simply separate yourself from those things, and only you can do that.

If I could discard one worry from my head, besides my worry about my parents' divorce, it would probably be the worry of what others think of me, or just of others, period. It is a common worry, but it can lead to even bigger ones that can cloud our vision of what we should really

worry about. That girl at school who is prettier than me, or the guy who gets better grades. The jealousy of feeling like someone is so much better than you can kill. Oh, the times when I sat looking at the popular table longingly, wishing I could be the one everyone was complimenting and fawning over. But then one thing comes into play:

Gratitude.

I would replace that worry, permanently, with gratitude. Knowing that I may not be popular, but I have friends. Knowing that I may not be magazine material, but I have a family who loves me. Knowing that I may not be the perfect size 2 athlete, but I have hobbies that I love. And knowing that there is always that one common denominator: Everyone is equal. As cheesy as it sounds, all my flaws make up me. If we could just slow down—if I could just slow down—in a moment of worry, and take even a couple of minutes, seconds to realize how grateful we are deep down inside for every mistake, flaw, and strange piece of uniqueness we have, then we could learn to love and accept ourselves. Don't get me wrong, I love my life and all, but having self-confidence would be a huge step forward for me. Not having to be told I'm smart to believe I am smart is a dream for me.

But it doesn't have to be.

If I—no, if we—could just be more grateful, accept our imperfections, and find a balance with our worries, the entire world would be a better place. Imagine it. The entire world wakes up one day and instantly has insanely high self-confidence—dream! It's not that easy. But nothing is impossible. If I could just spend a few minutes of every day remembering the things in life I am so incredibly thankful for, I could feel good about myself.

What would gratitude do for you in your life?

I don't know. I'm only 12.



# Fearless Future

By Leah Berkowitz, Grade 8

Worrying is natural. Everyone has experienced worry at some point in their lives. If you're a high school senior like my brother, you are probably worried about college applications and what you're going to do with the rest of your life. Suppose you are a part of a Jewish family like I am. Maybe you're worried about the anti-Semitism that has been happening in Europe. If you're a student in my language arts class, you might be worried about writing this essay – I know I am. My biggest worry at the moment? As an eighth grader, I'm really nervous about high school. I don't know what to expect, and I know that most of my friends won't be going to the same high school as me. That thought makes me nervous and fills me with anxiety.

Reading the YES! Magazine article "Life After Worry" brought something to my attention that I had never really thought about before. Worrying doesn't actually do anything positive for us. As Akaya Windwood said in her story, "...I realized worry had never changed the outcome of whatever I was worried about. Not once." Worry is something we all feel. It's a part of being human, but we need to learn to put our energy into something other than worry because constantly stressing over our problems won't fix them. Everyone will just get major headaches. Is there a way to stop worrying completely, or will we always be at least a little nervous when faced with a challenge?

Honestly, I don't know if we can ever truly stop worrying. Most people experience some level of stress on a daily basis, whether it's the math test you have to take or the huge five course Thanksgiving dinner you have to cook for your visiting relatives. If we try to replace the worry with something else, like Akaya suggested, perhaps we could keep the uncertainty and uneasiness at bay. Akaya described replacing her worry with trust—trust in people and our world. While I believe trust is

critical, that's not what I would choose to replace my worry with. When I think about high school, I can't just trust that I will make friends or be perfectly okay in all of my classes. That just isn't enough for me. If I was in my brother's position, I couldn't just trust that all my applications would be done on time and I would get into the school of my choice. And I don't know if my family can just trust that everything going on in Europe will be okay. Even with trust, I would still feel scared, just a little, about what could happen next. I don't want to have that kind of fear of the future.

That's why I think I would replace my worry and doubt with bravery. Having the courage to face the future is important to me. Being brave does not mean that my worry is gone completely—but it gives me the strength and courage to face whatever comes my way. I will be daring and undaunted and unafraid of whatever happens down the road. That math test I have to take later today? Not a problem! I'm fearless. That dinner for 15 people you have to cook? Come on, you've seen like ten episodes of Top Chef. You've got this! High school? Bring it on.

By replacing my worry with bravery and courage, I'm telling myself that I can do it, whatever "it" may be. I'll be able to do so much more, take more risks, and allow myself to reach beyond my limits. Worry wouldn't be holding me back anymore. Instead of simply trusting that things will be okay, I can take action and face the problem. I will make certain that everything will be alright in the end. As Benjamin Mee said, "All you need is 20 seconds of insane courage and I promise you something great will come out of it." It's time that I face my problems in a different way. Am I still worried about high school? Maybe a little. But now I know I can handle it. I can handle anything.

## Part 5: Sample Essays

# Doctor's Orders

By Rechanne Waddell, Grade 12

Worrying is a curse. It is a drug of its own.

It feels good, at first, but then becomes something of a habit, no,

an unconscious ritual that haunts and stalks the mind.

It tacks down all dreams, keeping them pinned on the ground when they're meant to float and soar galore.

This drug, this curse, this addiction, this enemy

is taking out so many that are blinded to it. They just can't see.

But how could I blame them? The same thing's happened to me.

College is supposed to be an exciting new adventure.

Worry has turned that once picturesque image into a never-ending pool of fear,

better known as a nightmare.

With deadlines, requirements, it can make or break a future.

This all fuels Worry's flame even more.

Worry clouds my mind,

sending chills up my spine,

making me fear and dread tomorrow.

And when I tell this to my mom I can see her beautiful face fill up with sorrow.

In the silence I can hear her say

"You are working too hard"

But I'm only working hard for you

"You are stressing so much"

But I can handle it

"You're scaring me so much..."

I'm scaring myself too

"...and if you keep going at this rate you're going to die like He did too."

He was my uncle. He wanted to be the best.

He rose from the ghetto and broke the levee

showing all what a Doctor he could be.

He let the worry pile up.

He worried for his patients, his family, his self, and his future.

He let the worry pile up.



## Part 5: Sample Essays

He let the worry pile on him.

He was my uncle.

He wanted to be the best.

He was my uncle who Worry laid to rest.

The last thoughts of seeing my uncle cold and dead aren't the best

but, I remember coming home in my little Sunday dress

to see my mom cry.

My dad tried to console her but you could see the hurt in her eyes.

This proud little six year old squeezed her mom tight,

telling her that everything would be alright.

I remember telling my mom, "Why worry? Don't cry. It doesn't live here,"

I pointed to my heart, "because Uncle told me to have no fear."

This seemed a lot easier to say at six years old.

But at seventeen I want it to ring in my heart strong and bold.

I want Love's warm embrace to comfort my heart,

and for Worry and I to drift apart.

Worry's infamous killers

— heart disease, diabetes, mental illness, and premature death —

that have struck my family won't strike me.

I can't let it. I won't let it. Life is the scary journey

which I have to make.

No longer can I, or will I, cower when I make a mistake.

How simpler, how happy, how fulfilling life will be,

when I choose now and forever to live worry free.

# To Be Determined

By Carolina Mendez, Grade 12

I wanted to make everything stop as I sat on the examination table in Dr. Jackson’s office. The more in depth he went in his explanation about my skin disease, the deeper I was sinking. Slowly, I began to drown out all the voices in the room. That was until one voice pierced through it all and asked me, “Are you afraid?” I turned my head to face my sister, unsure how to answer. I shrugged and told her that the answer was to be determined.

I was only seventeen years old when I was diagnosed with Vitiligo. In case you have no idea what that is, I will begin by saying it’s not contagious. From my understanding, Vitiligo is an autoimmune disease in which the cells that produce skin pigmentation are unable to function. In much simpler terms, I have loss of skin color on some parts of my body.

Weeks went by after the diagnosis, and my Vitiligo continued to progress. My family always told me not to worry, that I’m still me. At first, I thought that sounded bizarre. How could I be anyone else? The thought lingered for months, until one summer evening, I finally understood. I went out with a good friend of mine and we ran into a friend of hers. We chatted and laughed for a few minutes, and then I realized I hadn’t properly introduced myself. I told her my name as I stuck out my hand to meet hers. There was a long pause before I noticed she was staring at the white patch on my hand. She asked me if it was contagious, and I told her, “Not at all.” Still staring at my outstretched hand, she said, “I’d rather not.” There, I suddenly forgot who I was. I felt my heart drop to the deepest pits of my body. I have never seen anyone look at me with such disgust. I have never felt so ugly. I didn’t say anything, but my expression said it all. Did someone actually refuse to shake my hand because of my skin? Later that night, I cried for hours until I couldn’t cry anymore. I still think about that day and how it changed my outlook

towards myself.

After my diagnosis, many people said “It’s not that bad” or “You’re still the same person.” Yet, they failed to see the effect it had—and still has—on me. I struggle with confidence. I admit that even I catch myself staring at my skin, so I can understand the curiosity of others. I feel as if they only see my Vitiligo—not me. I struggle to accept myself. Once, I tried to use makeup to cover up what I could. I felt ridiculous. I struggle to sleep. I have countless nightmares where I wake up and look in the mirror and see myself completely covered, head to toe, in patches. I struggle remembering to take the medicines I need to take, and I struggle with keeping track of all the UV light therapies I have to attend. However, the biggest struggle is not knowing. There is no way of knowing when, where, or how quickly the Vitiligo will spread. There is no known cause or cure. It’s a painful waiting game—and I have grown tired of waiting.

One morning, the YES! Magazine article “Life After Worry,” by Akaya Windwood, appeared on my desk as an English assignment. It made me wonder about the different worries people have in their lives. Was I being selfish? Why not worry about something like global warming, or world hunger? Instantly, I realized: why worry about anything? Akaya Windwood wrote something that astonished me: “I realized that worry had never changed the outcome of whatever I was worried about.”

So why not throw it all away? I know I couldn’t throw away my Vitiligo, but I could throw away the negativity that I let get under my skin. All I really needed was hope. With hope, I gained much more than positivity. I gained security, trust, and confidence. This realization has been life-changing and eye-opening in more ways than anyone can understand. I think back to my response to my sister’s question. My “to be determined” has finally been determined. I’m not afraid.

# The Stress of Safety Pins

By Melanie Fox, Grade 12

When I was nine years old I listened to everything my older sister Christine told me, as if she was the Jesus of social graces and I, her disciple. I earnestly obeyed any and all direction from her. One thing she counseled me on was the length of my pants. My mother had bought me a pair of Levis with more length, so I could grow into them. When I'd walk, I would occasionally trip on my jeans. My sister instantly scolded me when I decided to roll up the ends of my jeans to prevent the hems from wearing down, because, of course, it was not fashionable to roll up the cuffs of your Levis. She showed me how to use a safety pin to keep the bottoms of my jeans in place.

On the first day of school, not even once within the first hour did I trip on my pants! That morning, our entire school went to our first assembly. We heard about all the different rules and regulations, no chewing gum in class, no phones on campus, the usual guidelines. One rule caught my attention more than any other: any student in possession of a sharp object at school would be in serious trouble. I sat in my class until lunch petrified that I'd be caught with safety pins on my pants. I couldn't ask to go to the bathroom; my teacher would be suspicious, wouldn't she? I didn't hear anything that was taught that morning. At lunch I went to the restroom and flushed my safety pins down the toilet, worried they would clog the drain and I'd get caught and expelled. The rest of the day, as I ran onto the playground or walked down the halls, I'd trip on my jeans.

Worries and the anxieties of life can be tedious and burdensome, even when they are as small as safety pins, but there is some merit in them. What we worry about, when we don't have a say in the matter, characterizes us. The part of this puzzle that is often overlooked is that sometimes our worries show where our

heart lies. It's how we act after we acknowledge our concern; it's the next step we take that defines us.

However, it is important to remember that not everyone has the willpower to break free of the metaphorical chains of worry. I agree with Akaya Windwood when she writes in her YES! Magazine article, "Life After Worry," that worry doesn't fix anything or anyone, and that it is a habit of the mind. And when we find someone who hasn't moved past their worry, we can still give that person some credit for how they feel. Our worries can define us personally, and is more meaningful than being defined by what others think of us. If we choose to worry, we should worry about what is important to us and to make sure that those things are truly valuable, like world affairs, rather than vapid anxieties like the volume of your hair.

Ultimately the problem with worry isn't worrying itself. If only I'd realized, in my younger and more vulnerable years, that I most likely wouldn't have been caught with the safety pins—and even if I were caught, it wouldn't have mattered. My worry was inevitable, but what I should have realized was that I wasn't going to make a difference by worrying the way I had. If I am going to worry I might as well worry about something important, and do something about it.

Today I worry about many useless things, and thousands of worthwhile things. I worry about writing this paper, and that while walking to the library I will get kidnapped. I worry that I'll disappoint the ones I love or that I talk way too much. These worries are aggravating—they take something special from me in the present that I don't even notice until the future. The goal is not to let worry send me into a coma of concern, but rather, make the point to live my life to the fullest now. You see, our worry isn't

## Part 5: Sample Essays

*Melanie Fox essay continued*

useless; it's how we worry and what we worry about that can be the problem. Do we let our anxieties bring us down and control us, or do we respond by replacing worry with making life a little better for someone? Life is hard and sometimes we can't help but worry, but it's how we let the worry define us that can truly make the difference.

# Blessing In Disguise

By Noah Schultz, Portland State University

I walk into the visitation center and see my father, hands moving rhythmically as he drums his fingers on the round table. His eyes wander as he impatiently awaits my arrival. I call out “Dad!” and his blank stare shifts to a wide grin. He quickly stands up and we embrace. The scents of cigarette smoke, instant coffee and engine grease fill my nostrils. I hate all three of them, but they are nostalgic. Childhood memories of working in his shop rush through my mind.

I start the visit by asking him how he is doing. Not the generic “How are you?” but a real “How are you?” For quite some time my father’s wellbeing has been one of my biggest worries. He is constantly telling me that he is fine but under his smile I can see the truth. When he sees the concern on my face he tries his best to change the subject by cracking a joke I’ve heard a hundred times before. I grin and laugh halfheartedly out of respect, acknowledging that the question makes him uncomfortable.

It is difficult to see the man that once stood as my hero walk the tight rope of the poverty line. His survival depends on a monthly disability check, food stamps and an eBay side hustle. The foundation of his life has been rattled by multiple sclerosis, divorce and a son sentenced to seven years in prison.

These worries linger in my mind, popping up to haunt me at random moments. During meals when people complain about the quality of the food, I wonder if my Dad has enough to eat. When the weather is cold I imagine him huddled next to a space heater in his trailer, bundled up in sweaters and long johns.

I know these aren’t the thoughts he would want to occupy my mind. He tells me to focus on my college studies and career aspirations. They are the first things he asks about when we talk. My success in these areas has become

intertwined with my love for my father. By striving for excellence in these pursuits, I honor him. His low socioeconomic status qualified me for financial aid—his struggles are allowing me to advance. Talk about blessings in disguise.

Although his sickness has drained his energy and robbed him of his muscle mass, he sits as a symbol of strength before me. I know that worrying does not help. There is nothing positive about filling my mind with anxiety and creating stories for situations that do not exist. In her essay *Life after Worry*, Akaya Windwood reminds me that worry never changes the outcome. This has become my new mantra.

My dad does not live his life like a victim; there is no reason why I should see him as one. My worry for him does neither of us any good. I know this, and yet my uneasiness persists. It is time to begin breaking down my worries into digestible pieces. I need to dissect them on the table of my mind—interrogate them and find their purpose. By converting frustration into passion I can take my power back. Mental alchemy at its finest.

This stress and worry is an obstacle on my path to success—dead weight strapped to my feet. It cramps my range of motion, preventing my arms from reaching for the stars. I refuse to sing the lyrics of “Woe Is Me.” My father hates that song. This man perseveres and makes do with what he has; I must strive to do double. His image will always remain planted on the dashboard of my heart, reminding me to be grateful and to smile through any hardship life throws my way.

I am pulled back to reality by five fingers waving in front of my face. “Son, are you there? Did you hear what I said?” I quickly gather my thoughts and respond “No, sorry Dad, what was that?” He looks at me quizzically and says “How are your classes going this term?” I smile and our visit begins.