

WRITING LESSON

LESS STUFF, MORE HEART



In the YES! Magazine article, “Less Stuff, More Heart: 5 Gifts On a New Dad’s Christmas List,” author Christopher Zumski Finke acknowledges that one way people connect is to exchange gifts—it’s a way to show our appreciation for one another. Now that he’s got a child in the house, Christopher wonders how he should deal with holiday commercialism that’s fixated on buying and giving gifts.

Students will use Christopher’s Zumski Finke’s article to write about what non-material gift they would ask for and why it would be meaningful to them.

Part 1: The Article “Less Stuff, More Heart: 5 Gifts On a New Dad’s Christmas List”

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Part 5: Sample Essays

“Stolen Stories,” by Eva Vallier, grade 7

“A Break From Racism,” by Rhys Hardiman-Mostow, grade 8

“Same Dreams, Different President,” by Heriberto Nava, grade 8

“Broken Mirror,” by Alejandra Wagnon, grade 11

“Kayla” by Jake Hill, grade 11

“To Walk the World on Trembling Legs,” by Remy Stewart, college

Less Stuff, More Heart: 5 Gifts On a New Dad's Christmas List

This is my first Christmas as a father. Since my baby has never known holiday commercialism, it's made me re-examine what I really want to ask for this year.



Still image from *It's a Wonderful Life*.

By Christopher Zumski Finke

As the snow falls over Bedford Falls in the final scene of *It's a Wonderful Life*, the townspeople gather in the home of George Bailey to donate what money they can to help him stay out of the clutches of Mr. Potter.

George has just returned to his family from his travels with the angel Clarence, who, in response to George's suicidal contemplation, shows him what the world would lose if he'd never been born. George returns to his life,

reinvigorated by a spirit of hope for the future and bolstered by the goodwill of those who love him.

It's a Wonderful Life is a Christmas movie, but it's not about commercial exploitation and presents and marketing. It's about real giving. No image of giving at Christmas means more to me than this film's finale.

Six months ago I became a father, and

this year will be my first Christmas with a child. I'm very much looking forward to it. My son doesn't yet understand what happens in post-Thanksgiving American culture and Christmas does not yet mean anything to him—historically, religiously, or, best of all, commercially. I plan to make the most of these years while he's young enough to not need gifts to be happy at Christmas; to try to show him it's not about presents, but giving.

I do sometimes wonder, now that we've got a child in the house, about how I should deal with the Christmas craze that has earmarked an entire season for buying and giving gifts.

To be sure, he'll get presents. Many. He has two grandmothers, and they want his life to be full of love and learning—and toys. I do not blame them because I want his life to be full of these things too. But I do sometimes wonder, now that we've got a child in the house, about how I should deal with the Christmas craze that has earmarked an entire season for buying and giving gifts.

I love Christmas. A whole lot. I try to be a conscious consumer, but it can be difficult in the overzealous commercial environment that is the United States in December.

I get swept up in the season. I love the music and movies, the tree, the nog, the spirit of wonder and joy. I know it's sappy, but still love it. My love of the holiday relates directly to the connectedness it breeds: Connection to my family and friends, yes; but even more, a connectivity within our culture. Whether you celebrate Christmas or ignore it or despise it, you certainly cannot escape it.

And one way connection occurs is through exchanging gifts to show appreciation for one another.

A sizeable portion of our calendar and budgets are devoted to gift-giving. According to Gallup, the average American consumer will spend \$786 this year on presents. Americans, it seems, love to buy gifts for others. Whether you find that number too high (or perhaps not high enough), apparently we're going to spend it.

And not just on babies. My son's grandmothers also asked me for a Christmas list.

I look around my home and our shelves are already full of the bits and bobs we give each other for the holidays. We've enough books to open a library and no place left to put any additions. Yet we keep asking for more (we all have our toys).

Now, with the baby, our home is filled with even more stuff—plush animals and bouncy chairs and swings. And he's yet to experience a single Christmas or birthday.

So this year I made a holiday wish list, keeping in mind the good people of Bedford Falls. I know it's not really necessary to spend almost \$800 on stuff for our shelves—even on adorable six-month-old-baby stuff.

Here's what I asked for.

1. A family tree

Each family's story is unique, and learning that story is priceless. I know bits and pieces of my family history, but have always wanted to dive deeper into where my family has come from. These stories are not always beautiful—I know parts of my family's history are not—but knowing how we fit into our own families, and how our families fit into our shared history, is an important part of being an informed, civic participant.

2. A donation

A professor I had once said that the world can never have too much idealism. There's

“Stories help us grow, learn empathy, and actually create change, if we're willing to let them.

no shortage of needs to be met in our world, and no shortage of inspired men and women working to meet them. And they desperately need our money.

I have my many interests and organizations I'm hoping to contribute to this year. Instead of giving to me, I've asked others to donate to them. In fact, I've written about two of them for YES! this year: Men as Peacemakers, and The Harry Potter Alliance.

3. A take-away

Rather than getting something, I'm asking people to take some stuff away. Come over and join in a Christmas take-away. Take something of mine, as a gift. Afterward, we'll donate the rest.

You can take it even further and offer a free home de-clutter and re-organization. Pick up some simple baskets and bins to fit the decor, spend an hour together going through the house, then provide some much need feng shui. Note: This is an especially valuable gift to parents of young children.

4. Stories

Stories help us grow, learn empathy, and actually create change, if we're willing to let them.

The stories that we have in common—our popular culture—are the shared experiences

of of a diverse population. Through them we understand ourselves, and each other, better. Dig in, and you'll find beautiful, strange, inspiring, responsible, equitable, gracious, and powerful gifts.

I'm asking for the graphic novel series *Saga*, a sci-fi story about starting a family committed to nonviolence in a time of war (the core of a story that also includes robots and ghosts, war and bounty hunters, and a galaxy in chaos). The book won this year's Hugo Award for Best Graphic Work and writer Brian K. Vaughan won an Eisner Award. The artist behind *Saga*, Fiona Staples, is also being lauded for her work this year.

Also on my list is the new Soundsupply.ly drop. Soundsupply is an innovative music sales company that combines bits of music from ten artists sold in bulk for a flat rate. Soundsupply is a music selling system based on direct-to-artists sales, where all profit is equally distributed. Good, responsible shopping. And the music is always great.

5. A break

I'm a bit obsessive. I care about culture and politics and environmental activism—a lot. There's one thing most folks like me have in common, regardless of our commitments: We never stop working. Or, when we stop working, our minds still swim in a sea of dedication/obsession marked by constant smart-phone use or random discussions of the day's Twitter highlights. Activists rarely take a break.

This year I'm hoping for the gift of clearing my mind and cutting the cords: To take a night or, if possible, a weekend to get away; to leave the smart phones at home and go out for dinner and a movie or a play or a long walk. If it weren't so cold where I am, I'd pack up the family and go canoeing at the lake; go camping; go hiking; go somewhere it's clear there will be no discussing work, no checking Twitter, no visiting the Huffington Post.

I'll probably give this one to myself.

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Imagine you're about to celebrate a special holiday, milestone, or birthday. If you could ask for any non-material gift, what would you ask for? What would make this gift so special to you?

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:
<https://bit.ly/2r2oeKv>

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).

	4	3	2	1
Focus on topic	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.
Organization	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.
Originality and strength of ideas	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.
Evidence and/or reasoning	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.
Command of grammar and conventions	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.
Voice	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.

Stolen Stories

Eva Vallier, grade 7

I try to breathe deeply but my grandma tied my *obi* too tight around my waist. I take a shallow breath instead and smell the incense that has wafted down the stairs, from the temple and into the gym. My *obi* is imprinted with flowers to match my kimono. The full gym is almost overwhelming for a first grader like me, but I smile because I can still taste the flavor of cherry shave ice.

Outside, lanterns are hung and people are dancing, like they do every July for the Bon Odori Festival, where I eat *soba* and watch people in colorful *yukatas* perform traditional Japanese dances. My mom leads me to a booth where she hands a man a few dollars to buy a book with a black and white picture of people behind a gate on the front cover. My mom shows me the book and explains to me that something happened in 1942, where all people of Japanese descent in certain parts of the United States were put in small cabins with dusty floors and no heat. My mom tells me that the children were not allowed to go to school and that the adults had their cars, their jobs, and their houses taken away from them. I wonder what it would have been like to live like that. I could not imagine a life that difficult. Then my mom tells me that my grandma spent three years of her childhood living that life.

“If you could only take three things somewhere for three years, what would you take?” my second grade teacher asks. I sit on the carpet as my teacher tells us that this was a decision people had to make when they were sent to the

Japanese internment camps. I think about how difficult it would be to choose only three things, then I realize that my grandma had to make this decision in real life. I stop thinking about what I would bring and wonder what my grandma actually chose to bring. I wonder about this for the rest of the day.

In sixth grade, I listen to my mom as she asks my grandma questions about her childhood. My grandma laughs when she tells a story about her siblings, but when my mom asks her about the Japanese internment camps, a nervous smile appears on my grandma’s face.

“I was pretty young, so I don’t really remember much,” my grandma tells us in a tenuous voice. It’s like she’s avoiding the topic. I later learned that there is a Japanese cultural concept called *gaman*. *Gaman* means enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity. The term can be translated to “perseverance” or “self-denial.” My grandma grew up with this concept and uses it in her everyday life. She does not ask for help and she does not share her suffering. She is strong, and masks her difficulties.

In the YES! article, “Less Stuff, More Heart: 5 Gifts On a New Dad’s Christmas List,” Christopher Zumski Finke says, “Stories help us grow, learn empathy, and actually create change.” Like Christopher Zumski Finke, I want to hear the stories from my grandma about the Japanese internment camps. I want to hear the stories from my grandma

because they shaped many parts of her life and many members of her family's, as well. And it shaped parts of my life, too.

I want to undo my grandma's *gaman*. Parts of my family's lives were stolen from them. I want to understand my family better. I want to have answers to questions that I've had for years. I want to hear their stories.

A Break From Racism

By Rhys Hardiman-Mostow, grade 8

If I could ask for a special gift, I would ask for racism to end so that I can identify as myself. I would not fear police, and I could have a break. I'm a thirteen-year-old Black girl with big dreams.

Racism has the Black minority oppressed. Black and beautiful is how I identify, and the racism against me, all Black women and men, is unacceptable. I'm defined by my stereotype, and I can't get a well-paying job! My people cross the street in order not to scare anyone. White women clutch their bags when a Black male walks by because they're scared they're going to get mugged.

I don't want people to be afraid of me, I want them to like me. When I'm in a dangerous situation, I don't want to hesitate to call 911. I don't want to grow up in fear of police because there should be nothing to be afraid of. I want to dial the number and say my problem. I don't want police to solve problems by ending a life or beating someone half to death in response to fear. I should not fear that police will kill me. We kneel during the national anthem to expose police brutality and racism in the United States of America. I should not have to kneel for my rights.

Christopher Zumski Finke has asked for five non-material gifts and a break from the world. I would also like to ask for a break. Christopher says, "I care about culture and politics and environmental activism—a lot." He needs a break from

activism and I need a break from the racism our "United" States have put Black people through. Black people have not forgotten what happened to us when cotton became an industry. We need a break from the names: Negro, Monkey, Blackie, Camel Lips. Black people need a break from the racism, a break from the biases, and a break from losing someone to a police shooting.

If racism was abolished I would be treated fairly. The world would be led by strong Black women. We would forgive what White people did to Blacks and not treat them the way they treated us because nobody should be treated that way. I would be greeted with smiles instead of stares. We would hug a brother instead of shoot one, and stay strong in the face of racism.

Same Dreams, Different President

By Heriberto Nava, grade 8

As my fourteenth birthday approaches, a gift I would ask for is the ability to vote for a different president of the United States of America. I know that as a middle school student, I don't have the right to vote, but I need to do something to make my voice heard and stand up for others who are threatened. Among the many harmful decisions our current president is making for our country, he has chosen to end DACA. This decision directly affects my older brother, who is enrolled in DACA. My brother isn't one of those "bad Mexicans" our president talks about in his speeches. He is one of the almost 700,000 current DACA recipients, commonly referred to as DREAMers, in this country.

My brother is one of the most hardworking people I have ever known. He works 48 hours a week at two different jobs, one at a bakery and one at a butcher shop, to try and save up for college. College is very expensive in America, and students under DACA are not eligible for federal financial aid. One day, he came home tired after working late only to see Donald Trump on television delivering the news that DACA was ending. It hurt me when I saw him cry in shock. I can't even imagine one day being in a good mood and then hearing a news anchor tell you that you can't accomplish your dreams anymore because of a decision made by the president and other people in power.

The news anchor used the phrase "original country." He said my brother would have to go back to his "original country" if DACA was ended—this

"original country" that he barely recognizes because he crossed the U.S.-Mexico Border when he was four. He has spent his life adapting to American culture and making friends here, just to be sent back to his "home country," confused and not knowing anybody or how to get around. Now my brother is scared to leave his family and have his dreams crushed.

This is an issue for the nearly 700,000 undocumented people across the country. Seeing the heartbroken faces on the news is just really sad. But in hard times like this, we need to have hope that our members of Congress vote to keep DACA alive. This country's economy will drop if our lawmakers choose to deport future surgeons, future engineers, and so many other immigrants and refugees who will make a difference in future Americans' lives. Instead of tearing families apart by deporting loved ones, Congress should protect the DREAMers—good people who contribute to the economy and work really hard just to provide for their family.

In the YES! Magazine article, "Less Stuff, More Heart," the author Christopher Zumski Finke suggests non-material gifts that are more meaningful than simple "stuff"—things like a family tree, donations in his name, or even a break. Since I don't have the gift of a vote, I have to use the gift of my voice to ask Congress to do the right thing. I'm using my voice to ask all readers to urge their senators and representatives to keep DACA, and also asking all those who can vote to elect politicians who will make

responsible decisions for our country.
If DACA is killed, my brother and the
hundreds of thousands of people in his
situation will be in a world of pain.
And because I stand up for myself, I'm
still here.

Broken Mirror

By Alejandra Wagon, grade 11

The holiday season is a time for family and friends. It's a time for giving gifts and sharing stories. However, with the holiday season fast approaching, the only gift I am given is time to think. With two weeks off from school, coupled with my mother's hectic work schedule, family time is limited to none. I spend my time alone, always thinking, thinking, thinking.

One thing I found myself thinking about quite often was Finke's essay on the more heartfelt gifts he wanted to receive this holiday season. The question resonated in my mind: What do I want? As an emotionally compromised teenager, coming up with a decent answer was much harder than I had anticipated. What about wisdom? No, too cliché. Family? Memories? Love? Every possible answer I thought of seemed "too this" or "not enough that," causing me endless frustration. I continued to comb through every inch of my mind, drawing up blank thoughts and empty ideas. I realized that I didn't know what I wanted and I didn't know how to find out.

With my hopes shattered, I put in my earbuds, trying to drown in rippling chords and drifting words, when I found the idea in front of me.

"Have you ever felt like nobody was there?" Yes.

"Have you ever felt forgotten in the middle of nowhere?" Always.

The chords washed over me and the

words crashed into me like waves on the shore. I felt exposed and vulnerable as every verse, every line, grabbed me by my very core. I sat quietly as the song crescendoed, finally ending its journey at the chorus: "You will be found."

My chest contracted and collapsed as I felt my heart travel up between my ears to soak in these words and this moment, the moment when I finally realized what I wanted.

I decided that I wanted to be found. Not only that, I wanted a mirror.

For my entire life, I have stared at myself in a broken mirror. When I reflect on my life and on the person I used to be, I don't think about how I prided myself on getting the highest behavior mark in class, or how I loved to explore every corner of the library (especially the ones I wasn't allowed in), or even how I grew to love going to school to learn. Instead, I think about how much I cried when my mark got moved down for talking too much—and how I wouldn't speak the next day. I think about how my parents, teachers, and I met to discuss my love for reading—and how they completely disregarded me and only talked about the "smart young lady" I would grow up to be. I think about how no matter how sick I felt I would force myself to go to school because getting anything less than perfect attendance and a perfect score would rupture the perfect vision of my perfect future, shattering my parent's perfect picture of the daughter I was, of the "young lady" I would grow up to be.

Throughout my life I have looked at myself through the eyes of other people. I have painted myself white and stretched myself thin, becoming a screen for others to project their visions. For as long as I can remember, I have prioritized satisfying others over satisfying myself, prioritized polishing my perfect image over actually liking what I saw in the mirror.

This year, I would like the gift of finding that young, hopeful girl in my reflection. I want to recognize her eyes, the ones that constantly looked for beauty in this big, bad world. I want to recognize her mouth, the one that always had words catapulting into the air and onto paper. I want to recognize her in her totality, in her strength and her weakness, in her love and her hate. Just her— not the person that became what everyone thought she was. I want to see her, in all her light and all her darkness.

In that reflection, I want to see me.

Kayla

By Jake Hill, grade 11

On the night of June 13th, I tell my best friend goodnight, just like I have a million times before. All is normal, and I am eager to go to sleep so I can wake up before her—like I always do—as well as greet her with a chipper good morning like I always do. Kayla Brooke Dotson has been my best friend since we met in the summer of 2013 because our sisters played on the same softball team. I had always wanted to be more than friends, and many times we talked about giving it a try, but since we were young, without driver's licenses, and lived almost an hour apart, we never got the chance to be something more. Kayla and I could always talk to each other. We looked to one another for advice and support on all sorts of issues.

We often stayed up half the night talking about our days and how much we missed each other; however, on this particular night, Kayla said she wasn't feeling well and that she wanted to sleep it off. I didn't think too much of this because it was just a little cold, right? Wrong. When Kayla was ten years old, she had a heart transplant. For seven years, all had been well and the heart and her body were accepting each other perfectly. In fact, two days prior to this night, she called me because she was ecstatic that she wouldn't have to have any procedures this year; her last checkup showed that everything was in tip-top shape. Little did I know that as I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep that night would be the last time Kayla and I would speak. At 12:05 a.m., Kayla got up to get a drink of water. When she got to the sink, she had

a seizure and fell. Kayla was airlifted to Fayetteville, and two hours and twenty-five minutes later the doctor called the time of death: 2:30 a.m.

If I could have one gift that was non-materialistic, like the ones mentioned in Christopher Zumski Finke's "Less Stuff, More Heart: 5 Gifts On a New Dad's Christmas List," I wouldn't be selfish. I wouldn't ask to have Kayla back. No, too many people have been touched by the words of wisdom she left behind in one of her personal diaries: her 27 life lessons. My favorite was number 13, "Trust in the journey, even when you don't understand." I wouldn't reverse all the good that has come from Kayla's passing. I wouldn't deny a whole town the one thing they needed to finally come together as a community. I wouldn't condemn her back to this earth where there was pain, suffering, and constant worry that her heart would be rejected by her body.

No, I would not ask for that. The one thing I would ask for is a chance to say goodbye, if only for a few minutes to see Kayla again and give her a chance to assure me that she is okay and that I no longer need to worry about her. If I was greedy, I would ask for one more day with her. I'm sure she would have plenty to tell me about her adventures in heaven because she would always talk my ear off. Just to see her smiling face for a short moment would be enough to give my heart and mind the closure it needs.

Sadly, this wish is only hypothetical.

Instead I am stuck here wondering what could have been. What if I hadn't let her go to sleep so easily that night? What kind of future with her did I miss out on? These are questions I won't know the answer to until I die and get the chance to see her again. For now, I will just listen to Kayla and trust the journey, even though I will not always understand it.

To Walk the World on Trembling Legs

By Remy Stewart, university

If I were to ask for any non-material gift, it would be for the truly accessible ability to travel the world. I am a disabled person with a chronic illness that limits the mobility of my arms and legs, causes me to be more susceptible to catching infectious diseases, and contributes to overall pain and fatigue. My dream gift would be the utmost security that despite my health limitations I would be able to travel to wherever my heart desires.

First would be the process through the airport. I would be able to walk through crowds of people and board the plane without fear of falling ill. Medical masks would not be stigmatized as they are in many Western countries. I would be able to bring mobility devices on flights and be comfortable using them wherever I go. I would be able to use assisted transit services whenever my legs become too wobbly. If the peak of Mount Kilimanjaro called me, there would be a road paved for those without the same strength to scale it. If the subway through Tokyo was my mode of transport, I would always have a seat available and people would believe that I am disabled if I requested one. If I wanted to swim in the Great Barrier Reef, I would have confidence that my needs would be met as I dived into the ocean blue.

There is so much with traveling that I feel able-bodied people take for granted. The limitations of my physical being are only half the battle. There is

also how the world meets the needs of a disabled traveler. We are not the norm in the space of adventure and exploration. One does not think of a person with a mobility impairment, contending with psychopathology, or suffering from a chronic illness as someone leading the charge to the ends of the earth. Such assumptions must be challenged, but being the pioneer to break these barriers is no easy task. The question always lingers: “What could possibly go wrong?” Not just in the sense of missing a flight or getting lost in an unfamiliar place, but what will happen if I cannot walk any further, if I fall ill, or if I can’t bear the pain of not being able to experience what you truly desire.

In his article, “Less Stuff, More Heart,” Christopher Zumski Finke is poignant to observe that the presents that many of us crave go beyond the realm of objects and expenditures. However, it’s essential to consider that what many individuals from marginalized backgrounds may distantly long for is often what those in power normally receive. I know that many people dream to travel the world. My aspiration lies beyond the usual limitations, and I may go so far as to say that a goal’s greater inaccessibility for me makes it all the more appealing.

For my non-material gift, I ask for your willingness to stretch out your hand and be an accomplice for the disabled who pursue their own adventures.

Confront those who gawk at us and ostracize us when we dare to walk outside our comfort zones —and into public squares—on broken legs. Do not push us beyond what we are able to do, but also do not shirk from taking the extra steps that allow us to partake in the same activities as able-bodied individuals. Understand that for us, this dream is all the sweeter in a world that was never built with us in mind. Your kindness and advocacy would be the most treasured present I could ever receive.