

# WRITING LESSON

# BRIDGING DIFFERENCES



The YES! Magazine article, **Why My Dad's Going Green** by **Kate Sheppard**, is a story about Kate's relationship with her father and how they found a way to reconcile their differences and make peace.

Student will use Kate Sheppard's story to write about the ways they have made peace with someone who holds conflicting beliefs.

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# Why My Dad's Going Green

My Republican dad saw the light. And it was green.



Thomas Sheppard in 1988 with Kate and her baby brother Alex.

**By Kate Sheppard**

*Reprinted from YES! Magazine, Fall 2008 issue*

IT STARTED WITH A LAWN SIGN WAR. IT WAS 2000. I was 16, and sold on Ralph Nader, even though I couldn't actually vote. I staked a Nader lawn sign in front of my parents' house. It was quickly stashed in the garage. I put it out again. And again, back to the garage. Dad was rooting for Bush.

I never really felt like my politics fit in my family. There was my conversion to vegetarianism (the same as "communism" in Dad's book), my stance against President Bush and the Iraq War, and my growing

commitment to environmental work. Dad griped that I was becoming one of "those radical environmentalists."

So when my father called a few years ago to ask me about this whole organics thing, I was confused. He asked, did I buy organic? Where did I shop? I was a college student at the time, so the answers were "When I can afford to" and "The closest grocery store to campus."

I was sort of flattered that Dad thought of me as his de facto source of information

about the young and eco-minded. Turns out he'd been reading in agricultural trade publications that organics were the next big thing. My father, though not always in tune with the latest on the environmental front, was ever a savvy businessman: He wanted in.

My father, Thomas Sheppard, has been a farmer since he was old enough to wield a shovel. Actually, since before he was even born.

**How do we form a more perfect union—or at least find enough common ground for a civil conversation? Breaking out of red-blue stereotypes is a good place to start. And listening to the hopes and fears that lie beneath the rhetoric. Respect helps, along with the expectation of transformation—our own as well as our adversaries’.**

The Sheppards came to what would become the United States from England in 1683, and promptly put down roots in Cumberland County, New Jersey. The first four Sheppard brothers arrived in the New World and started a subsistence farm about two miles from where my father and his brothers, Erwin and David, farm today in a town called Cedarville. My great-grandfather Gilbert procured the first tractor in Cedarville, a Case steam tractor, some time during the 1920s.

Today the Sheppard brothers farm 1,500 acres of lettuce, cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes, asparagus, and squash on one of the last vestiges of garden in the Garden State. And for my whole life—and as long as my father can remember, too—they've grown everything

“conventional.” Now, back when the first Sheppard brothers arrived, “conventional” probably meant horse-drawn plows and cow manure. But in our backward lexicon, it's come to indicate the use of very unconventional methods: petrochemical fertilizers, diesel tractors, and genetically modified plants.

Given that the brothers, along with everyone in the country for the most part, have become accustomed to fossil-fuel and chemical-intensive methods of growing food, I was surprised that my father was willing to venture into organics. Dad's a farmer, businessman, life-long Republican, and two-time Bush voter who drives one of those massive, gas-guzzling pickup trucks. In our town of 2,000, he's a member of the three-person town council, and the three of them take turns being mayor. It's his turn right now.

I've always figured myself the political outsider in the family. After graduating, I moved to the city and took a job as an environmental reporter, and became a bike-riding, Whole Foods-shopping urbanite. I got as far away from the farm as possible. So at first it seemed almost an affront for Dad to be venturing into what I considered my rebellion. What do you want here, old man?

But a visit home a few years later tipped me off to the possibility that we might agree on more than I'd thought. A new shopping complex was being built a few towns over, one of those strip malls of big box stores and acres of parking. It was going up right where a farm had been when I was younger. I asked Dad about it, and we shared an eye roll. “They're taking all this space in the country for these mega stores,” said Dad. “We're going to have three Wal-Marts in Cumberland County. What the hell do we need three Wal-Marts for?” Our county has less than 150,000 people. Not much to disagree with there. I didn't expect to hear Dad espousing anti-corporate sentiment, and it felt good to have something to bond over.

It touched a deep nerve within me. Each time I go home, the suburbs of Philadelphia sprawl farther and farther into South Jersey, taking over land that was farms only months before. I can't help but mourn the lost history

and culture of rural America, even though I've moved away. And imagine how Dad must feel. It's not just history for him; it's his livelihood. Dad says farmers in the area have been selling their land because of the congestion and development. "There was so much traffic around they couldn't get equipment up the road," he says.

Regardless of political affiliation, farmers remain the closest Americans to the earth. Though I write about these issues every day, I can't really understand the impacts of today's environmental problems like farmers do—decreasing open space, sprawl, shifting weather patterns, droughts, floods, invasive species. These long-term hazards to humankind are much more immediate threats to the livelihood of folks like Dad, so caring about them isn't as much a political issue as a matter of necessity.

But how often we "environmentalists," and the political Left in general, forget this. How much we confine ourselves by writing off these folks as party-line Republicans.

In recent years, the realities of the agricultural economy have increasingly led Dad across the political line. There's the increase in fuel costs: My family's farm consumes 1,000 gallons of diesel every week during the growing season, guzzled by the tractors, combines, and tractor-trailers that haul the vegetables to grocery stores along the East Coast. And while the farm used to grow lettuce that would be sold locally, it now has to compete with giant farms on the other side of the continent, and other continents.

Organics give small farms like Dad's a niche in the large chain grocery stores, and an "in" with rapidly expanding "natural" markets like Whole Foods. The strategy seems to be working—I spotted Sheppard Farms asparagus in a Whole Foods for the first time just a few weeks ago.

Of course, Dad and his brothers have had a lot to learn as they've greened the farm. Classes in organics didn't really exist when the three of them attended Cornell University's agricultural program, one of the best in the country. Right now they have only 40 organic acres out of 1,500, and they're trying to learn how to get

better yields out of them, and how to expand. "They say as you get deeper into organics, you'll reap more benefits as the soil gets further away from the time that chemicals were used. It will have time to recover," says Dad. "That could be just urban legend. Er, rural legend."

The next big project he's hoping to tackle is

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greening the farm's energy supply. The farm is located along the Delaware Bay, and bay breezes lend great potential for wind energy. Dad hopes the wind turbines could be a source of income.

He's also considering investing in solar panels, which could bring the farm's energy costs down from 16 to 10 cents per kilowatt-hour right away. He's even thinking about lobbying to get the town to go solar.

"We could put solar panels on the new firehouse," says Dad, "change those natural gas heaters to electric heaters and produce our own. That might be the more economical and more environmentally friendly thing to do." I never expected to hear the phrase "environmentally friendly" coming out of Dad's mouth.



But Congress keeps stalling on an extension of the tax credits for renewable energy, which are set to expire at the end of the year, and the lack of market assurance right now has put the solar industry in a holding pattern. I cover this action day-to-day on the Hill, so Dad called recently to find out how his representative, Frank LoBiondo, had voted on the extensions.

I assumed, based on party affiliation alone, that he'd voted against them. I was wrong. I guess that shows my own political biases. Dad said he'd call anyway, just to make sure LoBiondo knew how important these extensions are. It was the first time I'd heard Dad talk about calling his legislator about an environmental issue, so I was pumped. Isn't this what I spend my life working on—giving citizens the information they need to push for political reforms?

Tough economic times have made him more politically active in other areas as well. New Jersey has been in dire financial straits for quite a while, and this winter, the governor proposed total elimination of the state's Department of Agriculture. That, of course, angered my father and the other remaining vestiges of the agricultural community in the state. Dad bussed to the capitol to protest. Other farmers brought goats and tractors, creating quite a scene in Trenton. Considering he's made fun of me for protesting the Iraq War, it was funny to see Dad on his first political march. And the farmers won: The governor backed off the proposal.

The farming experience has made him break from the party line in other areas as well—like immigration. Dad says the country's immigration policies are both mistreating immigrants and imperiling the domestic agricultural sector. He understands this, since the farm relies heavily on immigrant workers, mostly from Mexico.

"The Sheppards never had any green cards," he adds. In Dad's book, if the first Sheppards rolled off the boat without permission to be here, who are we to tell others they don't have the same right? Many of the men and women Dad hires were farmers back home in Mexico, too, but hard economic times forced them to come to the U.S. A few years ago, Dad even

went to visit a village in Mexico that a lot of his workers call home, wanting to see where these folks are from.

I told him recently that I think he's slowly becoming a liberal, whether he likes it or not.

"I think it's more being a fiscal conservative," Dad said. "I would say I'm a fiscal conservative and socially liberal."

I asked him whether he'd vote for Bush a third time.

"Oh, hell no," he retorted.

"Dad, how'd I come out a liberal?" I asked.

"I was more liberal when I was your age," he said.

I might argue that he's migrating back that direction, from a Bush-hugger to a treehugger. But in recent years I've realized that a lot of my beliefs aren't in spite of where and how I grew up—they're because of it. I care about the land because it's from the land that my family makes a living. I care about food sources and security because I never had to think twice about where mine came from growing up—I could just walk out back and pick a tomato or a pepper. I care about open space and clean water and air because I can't imagine a childhood without them.

And so does Dad. Even if we may never agree on a lawn sign.

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**Kate Sheppard** wrote this article as part of *Purple America*, the Fall 2008 issue of *YES! Magazine*. Kate Sheppard is a senior reporter and the environment and energy editor at the *Huffington Post*. She previously reported for *Mother Jones*, *Grist*, and the *American Prospect*. Her writing has also been featured in the *New York Times'* Room for Debate blog, the *Guardian*, *Foreign Policy*, *High Country News*, *The Center for Public Integrity*, *In These Times*, and *Bitch*.

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## Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Has anyone close to you—a friend or family member—chosen to distance themselves from you or sever the relationship because of what you believe? What was the issue? How did you feel? Were you able to resolve it?

## 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/bridging-differences](http://www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/bridging-differences)

## 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.

## Afraid to Choose

By Lourdes Escobar, Grade 6

My dad has an issue with drinking a lot. When he drinks beer or wine he gets hyper, and sometimes my mom and his friends cannot control him. He either starts cursing at people or tries to hit and curse at my mom. My mom wants to go back to Guatemala, where her parents and the rest of her family are, and where it's safer.

My mom thinks it's dangerous here in Los Angeles because there are a lot of shootings, and there are a lot of people dying. She says, "I want to go with my parents because I miss them, and if I die I want to die in my country where I was born. There at least I will have seen my parents for the last time." That is why my mom wants us to leave.

When I read "Why My Dad's Going Green" in YES! Magazine it made me think about how my family and I are having problems. I just wish my dad and my mom got along. They don't know how happy I get when they are together. I love both of my parents the same. I just wish my dad would stop drinking beer. I don't want him to die, and I especially don't want to leave him alone. I want to be with him all my life.

Why? Because he has my blood, and he took care of me since I was a newborn baby. He's like a special gift to me. I can't just let him go like nothing. I wouldn't live one day without him. I love him, just the way he is and nobody is going to take me away from him.

I love my teachers, my friends, and family members. I don't want to drop out of school. I want to graduate from middle school and high school and I would want to be able to go to college. This is where I belong, and I can't let anyone take me away from here.

I need love from both of my parents, and I am not going to leave my dad. I definitely don't want to leave my mom because she's a gift that God gave me, and she's pregnant, so this is very

difficult. I don't know what to decide. I just wish I didn't have to decide. I wish I could have both of my parents, but I'm afraid I can only choose one of them. It's not easy when your parents divorce. Well, maybe for you it is, but for me it's not.

I can only have one parent guardian. It's all because of my dad drinking beer. If he wouldn't have the issue of drinking beer we would still be together as a family. My heart is broken into pieces—badly.

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## A Lesson on Life

By Haley Coe, Grade 8

“Why My Dad’s Going Green,” by Kate Sheppard is a wonderful article about how a daughter and father found common ground. I experienced a similar problem with my friend Lexi. We both had different opinions on homeschooling, but in the end, we realized that everyone is entitled to their own opinion, and neither one is more right than the other.

Homeschooling is a big controversy; many support it, many don’t know about it, and many are against it. Lack of knowledge about it can lead to stereotypes and outcasts. It takes a strong person to break through the negative comments and realize what a homeschooled student does, day to day.

Lexi and I were best friends forever. We met at Mommy and Me, and were inseparable from the start. Sleepovers and secrets bonded us to what we thought was a lifelong friendship.

Then something happened: kindergarten. Lexi was sent off to elementary school, and I stayed at home. Lexi was taught the alphabet by a stranger, while I was taught numbers from my mother. She was in a crowd of neighbors, while I sat alone with my parents and my dog.

There were no differences, yet. We were still best friends even though we saw each other a bit less. Gymnastic classes, dance lessons, and visiting each other on the weekends kept us together. Our friendship was still very strong.

By the time I reached fourth grade, and she had reached fifth, the issue of homeschool vs. public school had come into view. Unfortunately, Lexi started believing what her mother believed. Her ten-year-old mind was stubbornly convinced that homeschooling was the worst way to educate a child. This parochial view was resistant to my efforts. I tried to open her mind to the possibilities: maybe homeschooling really wasn’t that bad? But, no, she was attached to her beliefs and defended

them firmly.

We started to grow apart. Her subtle hints on how much I was missing out on hurt our friendship. It wasn’t just her fault, though. I was also a victim of defending my point of view. Our hard-headedness would not allow us to agree to disagree.

I was sad that our friendship was fading. This argument wasn’t the only factor, though. As we grew up, our personalities changed and we matured. We tried solving the problem. I went to her school for a day, just to try it out. I also gave her a long, nine-year-old lecture on how socialized I really was, but none of this helped. We were still friends, but not nearly as close as we once were.

We started hanging out with other friends. Lexi grew closer to Georgia, but it didn’t bother me because Penelope and I were now very close.

For four years, Lexi held her own in the debate. Because of our newfound maturity, we never got into heated discussions. Perhaps we both learned a lesson on life. She would still slip things into conversations, though. She strongly believed that homeschooling led to unsocialized children without any friends—this was a bit of an oxymoron since she was my friend. Throughout all of this, I knew from personal experience that I liked homeschooling better. There was less pressure, and I had a better relationship with my parents. I had plenty of friends from dance class and 4-H. And the best part is that most of the kids at 4-H were homeschooled, too!

We are now older; I am in eighth grade and Lexi is a freshman. I wouldn’t say the issue is exactly resolved, but for a year now, Lexi has said nothing negative about my education choices. I think she realizes that I’m just like everybody else! I’m a girl with chores, school, and friends. One of them being Lexi.

# The Racist in the Room

By Chereese Smith, Shoreline Community College

We're taught in schools and society that we should all be considered the same, regardless of the color of our skin. What then, when the message at home isn't congruent with that of what we are taught in school? My grandmother and I have argued about this a great deal. In the YES! Magazine article by Kate Sheppard, "Why My Dad's Going Green," she experienced a similar situation. Kate's father disapproved of her beliefs concerning politics and the environment, just the way my grandmother disapproved of my beliefs having to do with race. Although I was brought up in the same fashion as my grandmother was raised, the economic circumstances we grew up in may account for our differing views. Throughout these experiences with my grandmother, I have learned how people become racist.

I love my grandmother with all my heart. She has shown me more love and compassion than anyone in my life. On the other hand, I was watching a documentary on the civil rights movement in Little Rock, Arkansas, and I saw the same anger from the white students that I've seen in my grandmother. I cried for most of the film. I realized that my grandmother has shown me more hate than anyone I've ever met.

Growing up, I had a good friend named Rudy. My grandmother hated him because he was Mexican. One day, Rudy was standing on the other side of my fence, and we were talking. My grandmother was coming home from the store, saw him talking to me, and tried to run him over with her van. He hopped over the fence and ran away. We were only ten years old. Her hatred was obvious to everyone around her.

She made me feel horrible inside every time I would try to talk to her about this problem. She would call me a spic lover, and tell me not to call her Grandma anymore. She even removed me from her will when she found out

that I had a crush on a Hispanic boy.

When I was eighteen, my family and I went out to dinner. We were sitting at a booth, and on the other side, there was a Hispanic family. The family had a little baby girl who kept popping her head up and looking at us from the other side of the booth. My boyfriend at the time had no idea how racist my grandmother was. He turned to the baby and said, "Oh! What a cute baby!" He turned back around only to see my grandmother's face filled with anger, and she started making disgusted noises with her mouth. She said, "That's a slimy nasty baby!"

"Stop talking like that Grandma! It's just a little baby!" I hissed quietly. She looked at me, stood up, and said, "Ohhhhh. I forgot. You think they are human!" She started shouting all kinds of obscenities about Hispanics as she stormed out of the restaurant.

My grandmother was not always like this. She used to be so happy. Living in Las Vegas, we could smell when it was going to rain. We would walk outside, take a deep breath in through our noses, and my grandmother would say, "Do you smell that, kids? It's going to rain!" She would giggle and laugh as she chased us through the hot Vegas rain.

My grandmother moved to Las Vegas, Nevada, in 1952. She had no college education so she did manual labor at a construction site. Later, she opened Morlite Window Cleaning and received a lot of business from the casinos. She worked hard.

Things started to change in Las Vegas as the Hispanic population grew. Hispanic people were willing to do the same work for less pay. My grandmother began to resent Hispanics because her customers were leaving for cheaper prices. The more business she lost, the more sad and angry she became. It changed her; she let her anger and resentment turn her into a

## Part 5: Sample Essays

*(Cherese Smith essay continued)*

bigot.

Before I learned the practice of compassionate listening, I never really listened to my grandmother. I just thought she was racist and that was that. I believed she had no right to feel the way she does. This journey has been—well—hard. Slowly, through compassionate listening, I have begun to understand that by resenting my grandmother for her hate and racism, I have made myself part of the problem. I am now part of the solution.

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## Reasoning With My Better Half

By Wesely Mikiska, Appalachian State University

Finding the words to articulate love can be incredibly difficult compared to how easy it can be to find the words to fight. After reading Kate Sheppard's article, "Why My Dad's Going Green," about her relationship with her father becoming stronger through belief and love in each other, I looked into my own life to see where my beliefs and relationships rest. My family is spread across the globe with oceans and continents between us. The one relationship in my life that I find to be the most challenging and rewarding is with my wife.

My wife is one of the only people I know who can take anything in this world head on with stern confidence. When I look back over the eight years we have spent together, there were only a couple of times when neither of us would give in. Standing strong behind your values is very admirable, but compromise and compassion are the only things that actually make a marriage work.

Asking my wife to change her obsessive shopping habits was definitely dangerous ground. I would not recommend starting the same argument with your wife unless you have lots of time and patience—and, even then, proceed with caution. We were living in Tucson in 2004. We both had good jobs; she was working as a dental assistant, and I was working for my Uncle Star's masonry crew. I would come home from work covered in concrete dust and dried sweat; she would come home with a big smile and shopping bags. She was the type of person who wanted something and got it. No questions asked.

One day I looked around at the accumulation of stuff, and all I could see was "made in China," "made in Taiwan," and "made in Qatar." I could not take it anymore. I finally confronted her with intense irritation over her wasteful spending on cheap foreign-

made doodads. We spent several months arguing over meaningless material objects when finally a window of compromise opened. We watched a documentary called, "Mardi Gras Made in China," which sheds light on the slave-like working conditions in Chinese factories. Seeing kids earn 10 cents an hour to make beads for Americans to throw on the street during a party opened my wife's eyes to the impact her spending had on the rest of the world. We resolved our bickering by agreeing to make more informed and conscious decisions when we spend our money. We found that contributing to corporate slave labor was something we simply could not support.

With our newly transformed shopping habits, the next challenge to our relationship was television. My beliefs about television came from my mother. We never had television growing up because my mom saw it as a waste of time and ambition. She said it would make us lazy and fill our heads with nonsense. Now I am 27 years old. My wife and I have satellite television and those beliefs from childhood are reaffirmed almost every day. My wife, on the other hand, uses television as a way to unwind at the end of a hard day. I know how hard she works, and how much she deserves her time to relax. However, I've found that reality shows and entertainment news attach to the brain like leeches. They suck the creative blood out of society and replace it with distracting psychological agendas. I tried to sway my wife with my beliefs that the media is trying to tame her outlook and keep her mesmerized with meaningless cliffhangers. But do not forget how strong she is! An all-out remote control warfare ensued. Finding a compromise was hard, but we each made sacrifices and listened to each other. Now we unwind by talking and laughing.

Sharing this world with love, compassion,

## Part 5: Sample Essays

*(Wesely Mikiska essay continued)*

and compromise is the only way to truly develop relationships and make sustainable changes. Whether you are an environmentalist battling a Republican farmer, or a husband and wife struggling through the day-to-day, nothing is as powerful as growing and learning from somebody you genuinely believe in. Finding and working through these connections makes the world worth fighting for—even if my wife tries to make me give up smoking.

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