



**WRITING**

# **STUDY GUIDE**

**Challenges to the Dream:  
The Best of the Martin Luther  
King, Jr. Day  
Writing Awards  
at Carnegie Mellon University**

# Who am I?

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## Understanding Identity

The following selections deal with issues related to the construction of identity and how it shapes our interactions with the world by exploring the issues of race, gender, and sexuality.

*"One Person Wonder" – Ashley Birt, p. 26*

*"Lost Heritage" Brianna Kline Costa, p. 43*

*"Untitled" – Shane Creepingbear, p. 45*

*"Anomalies: My Struggle for Identity" – Erika Drain, p. 61*

*"I am Not Wrong: Wrong is Not My Name" Elsa Eckenrode, p. 63*

*"My Mother Speaks" – Ashley Smith, p.171*

*"Co-Ed" – Bridget Re, p. 153*

*"The Definition of Who I am" – Adam Saad, p. 162*

*"Breaking the Color Barrier" Themba Searles, p. 167*

Themba Searle's "Breaking the Color Barrier" and Erika Drain's "Anomalies: My Struggle for Identity" describe the experience negotiating between people's expectations of you and your own sense of self. "Segregation" by Frances Ruiz, "Lost Heritage" by Brianna Kline Costa, and "Untitled" by Shane Creepingbear explore questions of visibility and belonging. In "The Definition of Who I am," Adam Saad discusses his father's decision to lie about his country of origin to avoid discrimination, while Ashley Smith's "My Mother Speaks" describes her desire to hold onto her culture after immigrating to the United States a child. In "I am Not Wrong" Elsa Eckenrode confronts other people's perceptions of her gender and sexuality, while Bridget Re's "Co-Ed" describes the shame and confusion she experienced as the only girl on her school's soccer team. Finally, in "One Person Wonder" Ashley Birt rejects the role of spokesperson and declares her desire to be seen and treated as an individual.

## Questions for Group Discussion

- How do these authors understand their own racial/sexual/gender identities? How do they “know” who they are, and where does this knowledge come from?
- What kinds of feelings are evoked in these works when the author is unsure or expresses doubt about their identity?
- Based on these texts, what role does a person’s family have in shaping their sense of self? What about friends? Teachers? Strangers?
- How do these authors negotiate their sense of individuality with their racial, sexual, or cultural identities?
- Do these authors present their identities as a source of pride? Why or why not?

## Writing Prompt

Consider your own identity and how you define yourself. Have you ever been treated unfairly based on other people's assumptions about your identity, or have you ever been biased against others because of your assumptions about their identity? Write a narrative detailing an experience where these assumptions are confronted, including specific detailed descriptions of people, places, moments in time. Looking back from who you are now and how you see yourself, have your feelings about this experience changed?

## **Bias & Discrimination**

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In the following selections, authors share stories of discrimination, as both victims and witnesses. These works explore the emotional, physical, and financial consequences of bias and discrimination.

*"A Crime Too Dark" – Brittany Boyd, pg. 33*

*"Another Challenge to the Dream" – Brittany Boyd, pg. 35*

*"Chocolate and Vanilla" – Mya Green, pg. 79*

*"An Invisible Wall" – Nathan Hubel, pg. 97*

*"Rural Vandalism," Michael Mingo, pg. 135*

*"Co-Ed" – Bridget Re, pg. 153*

*"Unmovable" – Casey Spindler, pg. 175*

In "A Crime Too Dark," Brittany Boyd reflects on how colorism in the African-American community has affected her self-image, while in "Another Challenge to the Dream" she shares the disquieting experience of receiving a racist hate letter after "A Crime Too Dark" appeared in a local newspaper. In "Chocolate and Vanilla," Mya Green recounts a childhood experience that ended with a bloodied nose and the subpar care her injuries received from the white adults around her. Bridget Re's "Co-Ed" captures the complicated feelings of self-doubt that often accompanies discrimination, including an uncertainty about whether you're experiencing discrimination and how to respond. In "Unmovable" Casey Spindler recounts his aunt's response when a child refuses to swim with his cousin. In "An Invisible Wall," Nathan Hubel explains on how a chance encounter on a snowy day made him reflect on the pervasiveness of racial bias and how it impacts people's economic realities. And finally, Michael Mingo's "Rural Vandalism" demonstrates how deeply biased thinking can root itself in the mind of a person or a community.

## Questions for Group Discussion

- What kinds of bias are being described in these works? How do they manifest in terms of discrimination?
- What are the physical, emotional, or economic effects of bias and discrimination as described by these works? What other effects might bias and discrimination have on an individual or community?
- How do the people in these stories respond to experiencing or witnessing discrimination?
- What can people who experience discrimination do to defend and protect their selves? What can people who witness discrimination do to help victims?

## Writing Prompt

Discrimination takes many forms, both subtle and blatant. If you have not experienced it directly, you have witnessed it in various forms in your life. Describe your earliest memory of being treated unfairly or treating others unfairly and reflect on how you responded at the time and how that experience may have changed you or shaped the person you are now.

## Gender & Sexuality

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The following selections explore the complicated role that family plays in determining our identities, be they distant relatives remembered through history or the immediate families we live with each day.

*"Sorry" – Ashley Birt, pg. 29*

*"I am Not Wrong: Wrong is Not My Name" – Elsa Eckenrode, pg. 63*

*"Wife" – Hannah Giesler, pg. 70*

*"Letters" – Leo Johnson, pg. 103*

*"The War on Terror" – Kat Mandeville, pg. 125*

*"Squint" – Claire Matway, pg. 131*

*"88" – Ryan Tuchin, pg. 186*

Hannah Geisler's "Wife" exposes and resists the constraints of gendered expectations for young women, while Kat Mandeville's "The War on Terror" raises the possibility of a finding strength in femininity. In "Squint," Claire Matway recalls the first Christmas her family fully included her Uncle's partner, despite their twenty-year relationship. Ryan Tuchin's "88" reveals the threat that LGBTQ folks face when demanding political representation and rights. In "Sorry," Ashley Birt traces her sometimes strained by loving relationship with her older sibling and examines the role her sibling's sexual and gender identity plays in their relationship. In "Letters," Leo Johnson reflects on his first crush, and what might have been. And finally, Elsa Eckenrode's "I am Not Wrong: Wrong in Not My Name," confronts other people's perceptions of her gender and sexuality and finds strength in the very things people are trying to tell her are "wrong" about her.

## Questions for Group Discussion

- What does it mean to have a gender? What does it mean to be a “boy” or a “girl”, or a “woman” or a “man?”
- How does gender shape our sense of self? How does this knowledge affect our behavior?
- How do the authors and/or the people they describe in the selections understand their own genders and/or sexualities?
- How do the authors describe other people’s perceptions of them? How do they react to these perceptions?

## Writing Prompt

Gender, sexuality, and identity are complex, interrelated issues. Our culture has many gender stereotypes that continue to limit and discriminate against those who do not fit those generalized assumptions. Has your sense of your own gender identity changed over the course of your life in terms of how you see yourself versus how others see you? Write about an occasion which forced you to examine your assumptions about gender in relation to your self-identity or that of others.

## Class

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The following selections are concerned with issues of class, exploring the ways in which economic disparity often intersects with other forms of injustice and shapes the lives and futures of those living without access to financial security.

*“Phone Bank” – Amanda Huminski, pg. 99*

*“A Different Kind of Field” – Sierra Laventure-Voltz, pg. 112*

*“An Invisible Wall” – Nathan Hubel, pg. 97*

*“College Kids” – Leslie M. Mullins, pg. 137*

*“Give” – Alexis Payne, pg. 143*

In “Phone Bank,” Amanda Huminski reflect on her first job in a call center and wonders how her colleagues—primarily older black women—are able to survive on such meager wages. In “A Different Kind of Field,” Sierra Laventure-Voltz recalls the tensions that were raised when her affluent school’s soccer team attempted to hold practice on a field in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood. In “An Invisible Wall,” Nathan Hubel explains on how a chance encounter on a snowy day made him reflect on the pervasiveness of racial bias and how it impacts people’s economic realities. Alex Payne’s “Give” capture the physical and emotional pain her father feels after a life of physical labor. And finally, Leslie M. Mullin’s “College Kids” reveals the ease with which people turn a blind eye to poverty and suffering.

## Questions for Group Discussion

- What do these works reveal about the intersections of race and class?
- In what ways do racial bias and class inequality inform and reinforce each other?
- How do the authors respond to witnessing class inequality? What do they do? What could they do?
- What are some of the ways that financial insecurity affects people's daily lives? What about their futures?

## Writing Prompt

Unlike other forms of discrimination—like racism and sexism, for example—discrimination based on social class can sometimes be less obvious. Regardless of what social class you come from, you probably have experienced situations in which these class distinctions have revealed themselves. For example, some of your friends or family members may come from different social classes. These can be reflected in what kinds of houses they live in, what kinds of cars they drive, where they go on vacation or if they go on vacation at all, etc. Write about an encounter in which class differences between you and someone you know became apparent and how you dealt with it, and whether that affected your relationship with your acquaintance.

## Immigration

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The following selections explore the experience of immigrants and immigrant families while raising questions about cultural identity, belonging, and assimilation.

*"The Ink that Gives the White Page a Meaning"* – Amma Ababio, pg. 15

*"Finding the Perfect American Model"* – Ang Li, pg. 117

*"The Definition of Who I am"* – Adam Saad, pg. 162

*"My Mother Speaks"* – Ashley Smith, pg. 171

*"Tobacco and Curry Leaves"* – Indhu Sekar, pg. 170

*"some assembly required"* – Javier Spivey, pg. 176

In "The Ink that Gives the White Page a Meaning," Amma Ababio shares her experience emigrating to the U.S. from Ghana and details her efforts to learn about each of these cultures at different points in her life. Similarly, Ang Li's "Finding the Perfect American Model," describes her attempts fit into American culture and as an ongoing process of learning and assimilation. In "My Mother Speaks," Ashley Smith questions what might be lost in the process of assimilation and stakes a claim for retaining original cultural knowledge. In "some assembly required," Javier Spivey expresses an anxiety over the loss of one culture in pursuit of acceptance in another, portraying assimilation as multigenerational process demanded by cultural and political pressures. Adam Saad's "The Definition of Who I am" literalizes those political pressures by discussing his Egyptian-born father's attempts to avoid harassment and discrimination by claiming to be Greek instead of Arabic. Conversely, Indhu Sekar's "Tobacco and Curry Leaves" portrays an embodied multiculturalism, opening a conceptual space in which the reconciliation of multiple cultures is possible.

## Questions for Group Discussion

- What is the difference between nationality and culture? How do national and cultural identities compare to other forms of identity (racial, gender, class, etc.)?
- How do these works describe the process of assimilation? What are the benefits of assimilation? What about the drawbacks?
- What do these works tell us about what it means to “be” American?
- What are the continuities and differences in the experiences of first-generation immigrants and their descendants?
- How do politics shape immigrant experiences? Do immigrants from different parts of the world have the same experiences? What commonalities might they share; what might be different?

## Writing Prompt

Everyone in America, except for Native Americans, at some point in their family history came from somewhere else. Slaves were forcibly shipped to the United States, while others came pursuing the "American Dream." If you or your parents are immigrants, do you have personal stories dealing with specific situations in which you were treated differently due to others' perceptions of you as a "foreigner"? If your family has been in this country for generations, what has your experience been in encountering and dealing with more recent immigrants? Write about one specific occasion in which you have had to deal with differences—cultural, economic, political, etc.—that arise from issues connected to immigration.

## Family

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The following selections explore the complicated role that family plays in determining our identities, be they distant relatives remembered through history or the immediate families we live with each day.

*"The Ink That Gives the White Page a Meaning" – Amma Ababio, pg. 15*

*"Harriet Faid" – Connie Amoroso, pg. 18*

*"Ghost Dance" – Rachel Belloma, pg. 23*

*"My Father Tries to Bond With Me" – Jonathan deVries, pg. 52*

*"Dusty Memories" – Lauren Hirata, pg. 89*

Amma Ababio's "The Ink that Gives the White Page a Meaning" recounts Ababio's experience immigrating to the United States as child and how learning about her family helped her learn about the country she'd left behind. In "Harriet Faid," Connie Amoroso attempts to connect to her late great-grandmother, the memory of whom had been erased from the family history, while Rachel Belloma's "Ghost Dance" explores a family history marked by remembrance and forgetting complicated by the fact that one side of her family tree is responsible the historic erasure of the other. In "Dusty Memories," Lauren Hirata shares the experience of visiting the Japanese internment camp where her grandmother was detained during WWII and reflects on what it means to be a Japanese-American then and now. Finally, in "My Father Tries to Bond With Me," Jonathan deVries expresses uncertainty over his relationship to his family after his father attempts to engage him in a racist conversation.

## Questions for Group Discussion

- How does family influence the way we think about ourselves, our identities, and our cultures?
- What kinds of familial tensions are visible in these works? How do they affect the authors?
- How do the authors in these works describe remembrance and forgetting in relationship to family and family histories? Why are some people and histories remembered, and why are some forgotten?
- In what ways do family histories relate to or reflect larger, political histories? How does this inform the way we think of family? Of politics?

## Writing Prompt

Part of the process of becoming an adult involves deciding for ourselves how we feel about various issues, as opposed to simply accepting our family's attitudes toward those issues. In examining your family background and your family's views on other issues dealt with in this anthology—race, gender, class, etc.—what viewpoints do you continue to share with your family, and on what issues do you differ? Are there parts of your family history you are proud of? Ashamed of? Write about an incident in your family history, or something that has occurred more recently involving your life directly, which has affected your sense of identity either positively or negatively.

## Relationships

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The following selections examine the ways in which difference affects our interpersonal relationships, both romantic and platonic. The relationships described in these selections are sometimes troubled, often revelatory.

*“Soljah” – Casey Artz, pg. 20*

*“My First Best Friend” – Arica L. Hayes, pg. 84*

*“Black and White Playground” – Dana Horton, pg. 95*

*“Letters” – Leo Johnson, pg.*

*“Yoko” – Sally Mao, pg.*

Casey Artz’s “Soljah” expresses the nervous joy that comes with being accepted into a new—and different—friend group. In “My First Best Friend,” Arica L. Hayes recounts the social pressures that put tension on her relationship with her childhood best friend, while Dana Horton’s “Black and White Playground” describes the way in which her cousin and her cousin’s boyfriend navigate the social and familial disapproval over their interracial relationship. In “Letters,” Leo Johnson reminisces about a childhood friendship turned unreciprocated crush complicated by both race and sexuality. Finally, Sally Mao’s “Yoko” expresses regret over not befriending a half-Japanese classmate during her childhood in Hunan, China.

## Questions for Group Discussion

- Many of these selections explore the difficulty of building and/or maintaining cross-cultural relationships. What are some of the difficulties that these authors describe?
- Hayes, Horton, and Mao all describe situations in which family and social pressure discourages interracial/intercultural relationships. How do these authors or the people they describe navigate these pressures?
- What are the benefits of cross-cultural relationships, as described by the authors and from your own personal experience?

## Writing Prompt

Who we choose as friends and who chooses us as friends—these are complicated choices, particularly when we are children. Do most of your friends come from backgrounds similar to your own, or do you have a more diverse group of friends? Have you ever hidden a friendship from family or other friends, or had limitations placed on a friendship based on external forces driven by lack of cross-cultural understanding? Write about a friendship that has been influenced positively or negatively by larger cultural forces.

## School

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The following selections explore the role that schools—as places of learning and socialization—play in shaping young people’s lived experience of race.

*“One Person Wonder”- Ashley Birt, pg. 26*

*“Being a Minority in a School of the White and Privileged” – Djibril Branch, pg. 37*

*“Coloring Book” – Justin Ker, pg. 110*

*“A Different Kind of Field” – Sierra Laventure-Voltz, pg. 112*

*“Racism at School” – Justin Platek, pg. 149*

*“For a Day the Air is New”—Claire Matway, pg. 130*

In “One Person Wonder,” Ashley Birt describes her transition from a diverse high school to a predominantly white college and examines the individual pressures that come with underrepresentation. Djibril Branche humorously explores similar territory in “Being a Minority in a School of the White and Privileged.” Sierra Laventure-Voltz’s “A Different Kind of Field” recalls a time when her affluent school’s soccer team attempted to hold practice on a field in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood. Justin Platek’s “Racism at School,” describes a day at a “typical” American high school, where racial tensions result in distrust, instructor bias, and student self-segregation, while Justin Ker reflects on an early schooling experience where a lesson in coloring was also a lesson in race. And finally, Claire Matway’s “For a Day the Air is New” captures the possibility that school might be a place where students of all races come together, if just for a day.

## Questions for Group Discussion

- What role does the school play shaping young people's lived experience of race? What about other forms of diversity? Are the lessons learned in the classroom and the lunchroom the same?
- How do Birt and Branch describe being minority students in predominantly white schools? What might make their experiences more positive?
- Laventure-Voltz's piece describes a tense moment that arises at the intersection of racial and economic inequality. How do these disparities play out in schools, both at the level of the school system and within individual schools?
- Platek observes racial self-segregation in his school, while Matway remembers a moment when students consciously chose to integrate themselves. Does self-segregation happen in your schools? Why? What can students, teachers, and other interested parties do to promote social integration in schools?

## Writing Prompt

Most likely, you are more familiar with a school environment than with just about any other except for your home life. You are experts on school—the social dynamics, the expectations and rules, etc. Often, students get grouped together in external ways that can cause tension and bias—the tracking of classes, the gender and race dynamics of who is together inside and outside of the classrooms and cafeterias, the playgrounds and study halls. Are there examples of segregation, bullying, shunning, in your own school? Write about an experience at school dealing with a different kind of "education" or awareness having to do with implicit or explicit bias or discrimination or singly out of individuals in unfair ways.