

Lesson 1: You should want to be “That Person”

by Nestor Walters

If you did time in the military, you likely heard a term thrown around: “*That* guy/girl/person.”

And when I tell you you should want to be them, you say “Hey, I don’t want to be *that* guy.” That guy dropped his NODs; that girl brought the wrong comms adapter; they snore in the hideshow, snort lines of wasabi, skip showers on deployment. And sure, maybe you don’t want to be the person who did all those things (like me), but you do want something that “That person” has: they are memorable.

Standing out is one of the best things you can do for a college admissions board. But, I argue, many of us have a skewed notion of what that means. We think we’ll stand out by drumming out a long list of accomplishments, but that is precisely what the admissions officers are low-key sick of reading.

So how do you stand out?

“Show them you are one *in* a million, not one *of* a million,” says Glenn Kramon, a business-writing lecturer at Stanford’s Graduate School of business. I would like to take it a step further:

Everyone is one in a million if they’re not afraid of their own story.

You want to be that applicant about whom they can say, “Hey, what about that guy who taught himself yoyo tricks while he was stuck in a hotel during a typhoon? What about that girl who adopted two sick old dogs with bloated cancer sores? How about that kid who moved six times before he was ten, and now wants to make movies that comfort people?”

Your personal statement is more than a cover letter. It’s a chance to explore your personal flavor of weird, stir it in a pot of mismatched circumstance, spice with self-reflection, spill it on the floor, mop it up, serve it with dust-bunny garnishes like it’s a white truffle beluga caviar casserole.

So that’s what we’re doing in this series: You bring the raw materials, we (NSI) help you mix them, everybody grubs.

As a first writing exercise, I encourage you to take “boring” questions, and go a few extra layers deep with them. Each “layer” asks a question about the previous layer’s answer, and so licenses you to explore topics that might not come to mind at first. I discuss this more in the video, which you should absolutely watch, but here’s the gist:

Examples of boring prompts to seven-layer twist:

- Why did you join the military?
- What is your favorite/least favorite thing about your family/upbringing?
- What are your goals with school?

See, the tendency is to say: “I joined to serve my country.” Period. “I like my mom’s cooking.” Period. “I want to get my degree.” Period.

But those answers could do so much more.

Here are my seven layers of answers, followed by a short "essay." It's a total freewrite (not edited), just something to show you how these ideas can weave into a narrative. Note: I noticed, after I was done, that I used all "why" questions. Not the worst thing ever, but don't feel limited to them. Feel free to ask all the who/what/when/why/how's. Just keep them open-ended and explorative.

What was/is a/the favorite thing about my family?

1. Saturday and Sunday lunches, as a teenager, mom would cook homemade Greek food (I grew up in Greece) and we would all eat together and watch Friends reruns.

Why did I enjoy that?

2. Saturday mornings were my free mornings, so I could work out from 8am-12pm at the local gym, practice my Tae Kwon Do kicks (don't make fun of me, it's all I had) and lift weights.

Why did I go to the gym/do TKD

3. Because I was bullied/got myself into trouble as a kid and thought I could train my way into confidence.

a. Why do I think I was bullied? OR

b. Why did I think I could train my way into confidence?

4.

- a. Because we settled down in Greece when I was eight after moving around a lot, I didn't speak the language at first and hadn't learned to get along with kids my age.

i. Why did you settle down in Greece when you were eight?

ii. Why did you move around a lot?

- b. Because I watched superhero movies and read comic books which were on one hand encouraging, but also gave me a romanticized idea of how life works.

- i. Why did you watch superhero movies?
5. Because my parents were missionaries when I was young.
 - a. Why were your parents missionaries?
 6. Because my dad met some interesting people while he was hitchhiking through India during his world travels.
 7. I grew up with four brothers, my dad is a science fiction writer and we were all into action/adventure and hero movies

And here's the short essay (loosely) inspired by the answers:

What matters to you and why? (A common Stanford short essay prompt)

Being a positive role model is important to me. After moving around for the first eight years of my life, I was going to school in Greece where I struggled to speak the language and had a hard time fitting in. I remember one day in fourth grade, running home from school and being chased by x number of kids. I rang the intercom, my father came down and shooed them away in a combination of angry English and broken Greek. I promised myself I'd work out, learn martial arts and get to a point where I could fend for myself. I spent hours in the gym, sometimes kicking the bag until the tops of my feet bled. Eventually, my pursuit led me to the military where I made some of my closest friendships and finally felt like I belonged. However, the drive to assert my confidence through violence also led to anxieties and insecurities that I still have to deal with. Because of this, I want to show younger people that there are other ways and help them not go down my path etc.

Remember: this exercise is only as effective as you are honest with yourself. No one has to read your answers but you. Surprise yourself. Maybe you instinctively want to answer a certain way, but your inner critic

shuts your idea down. Play around with it. Ask yourself, what if that were true? Can a part of it be true? Then see what comes next.

Feel free to do this exercise multiple times, starting with different questions or asking different follow-ons. Also, try to connect with others who are writing their essays. One of the best things you can do for your writing is learn to give and receive constructive feedback.

That's all for today.