

College Application Tips: Tackling the Personal Essay

By LAURA ZACCARO and [LAUREN SHER](#)

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When it comes to applying to college, many students fear the personal essay above all.

Bari Norman, a former admissions officer at Columbia University and president of [Expert Admissions](#), a Manhattan, N.Y.-based firm which offers personalized counseling for the college admissions process, appeared on "[Good Morning America](#)" today, with tips on how to ace your college application.

To score an acceptance letter, experts say the essay must stand out from the crowd.

Personal Essay Tips and Tricks

The main college essay should be personal and tell some story about the applicant, Norman says. It's the student's space to introduce themselves to the school, and tell the admissions officers what he or she wants them to know.

Too many kids think that if they have no special talents or tragedies to write about, their essay will be a bust. Every experience, if you add them together, makes a student unique. Norman says admissions officers are looking at how you interpret your experience and how you communicate it.

"Write about yourself, not about your mother"

"I read too many generic essays when I was an admissions officer about how much someone's mom loved them and the sacrifices they made to raise them and it made me want to adopt the mom, not admit the kid!" Norman says, "No offense to all the wonderful moms out there!"

Instead, she suggests thinking about other things in your life that are more revealing.

*Supplemental essays should complement the narrative of the personal essay. Make sure they don't read like a resume, but instead reveal the real you, Norman says.

Sample Personal Essay Draft 1

Below is the first draft and a final draft of a student's college essay, with Norman's comments below.

Change is a hard concept to grasp for a young child who does not have much experience with anything outside of his small world. I had to grasp this concept multiple times as I moved from country to country growing up. Before I was 10 years old I had already lived in 4 different countries, which is more than most people live in their entire lives. I wouldn't say that these changes in my life have been completely dreadful but they were certainly not easy either.

Born in Brasil, I was introduced to the United States at the age of 1. I was still too young to really notice and remember details until this day. My parents said I was happy in Miami. We had a small house by a lake where I used to go swimming with my grandfather while he was still healthy. After 2 years and 8 months of my life, my little sister was born, changing my life forever.

At the age of 4 I moved to Colombia. Colombia was definitely my least-enjoyed change. I did not like the weather and the dangers present in that area. Being there taught me that you are never too safe no matter where you are. Everything was dangerous in some way and it was impossible to just go out on the street with your friends and run around. Another horrible thing about Colombia was the amount of earthquakes. Although none of them endangered my life, many others were hurt during those hours I used to spend hidden under a table until it was safe to come out. Fortunately, at the age of 6, I moved to Spain.

Living in Madrid was probably one of the best experiences of my life. I still remember almost all of my 3 years there quite clearly. Our house was in a suburb called La Moraleja. Although I denied it at the time, I used to enjoy all the trips I had to go on with my parents every weekend. I would get to visit many ancient towns where the history is present everywhere. I visited old castles, cemeteries, and even jails! My friends were from all over the world so I got to learn about cultures I had never heard of before. I was very upset when my parents told me we had to move and couldn't believe it. I dreaded Miami at first but now it has grown upon me. I cherish my past experiences in other countries because I feel as if they have shown me a little bit more about cultures and people that I would never have learned about in school.

Norman's Critique:

■There is a lot of "I lived here, then I moved there," but little depth to any of these experiences (which are legitimately interesting!). Even the chronology isn't clear, and is a bit confusing.

■The essay lacks overall focus and tends to introduce tangential details within paragraphs that detract from the overall "message" of the essay.

■Transitions and a clear flow are a must when moving from thought to thought; this essay moves abruptly from one paragraph to the next and it lacks a compelling "voice."

■The student refers to some important things (his heritage, his friends, his travels, what he thought about the world as a result of what he saw), but he never gets into the details of the individual experiences that really informed his way of looking at the world. There's not much depth about him as a person.

Sample Personal Essay Final

Before I was 10 years old, I had already lived in four different countries, allowing me to learn about many different cultures and make many observations about people and places, more generally. In Brazil, I was born into a multi-cultural family. My mother was born in Brazil, but from Italian descent, while my father was from a "rival" country, Argentina. No one seemed to care that my father was not like the rest of my mother's family and they just accepted him into the family. This is my foundation and where I come from, both literally and figuratively.

I started out in Brazil, but at the age of four I moved to Colombia. Colombia was definitely my least-enjoyed "stop." Having to live in constant fear of terrorism was horrible. Colombia was also my first real experience with prejudice. In Colombia, I had a good friend named Sameer, who was Arab; people outside of my family looked down on me, as if he were a bad person just because of his ethnicity and as if I were a bad person for being his friend. I did not understand why it mattered where someone was from, considering that you are not defined by where you were born or what your heritage is, but rather the person you are and the way you choose to live your life. Given this experience and others like it, I was not sad to leave Colombia after two years. We then moved to Spain.

Living in Madrid was probably one of the most culture-filled experiences of my life. I still remember most of my three years there quite clearly. Our house was in a suburb called La Moraleja. Although Spain was safe, it was still not the ideal place to live. Racism was rampant. My best friend, Pablo, was of African descent and again, people would look down upon our friendship as if it were a sin. I used to take

road trips across Spain with my family to learn about ancient civilizations and how much of an issue slavery was in the olden days, and it was clear that for many, the olden days still lingered. Each of those trips was like a new chapter of a history book I wanted to devour. After Spain, at the age of nine, I moved to Miami.

Miami is definitely the most culturally diverse city I have ever lived in, but somehow, people still manage to judge. During my first year here, the kids used to make fun of me for having a British accent because of my studies in a British school in Madrid. I even got made fun of for my Spanish accent when I spoke Spanish because of the lisp the Spanish have when they speak (compared to many of the local Cubans). In the other countries, I was judged for the people I spent my time with. But in the United States, I was the source, and it felt different.

After all my travels, the only place I truly feel happy and unbothered is Brazil. Maybe it is the comfort my family provides me or perhaps I have not been around to see that racism is present there as well. Whatever it is, I wish I could spread that into every country I have lived in and show people that, at the root, everybody actually is the same.

Norman's Critique:

- The final draft is easier and more interesting to follow.
- The "message" of the essay is clear from the start, but it doesn't read like the thesis in a five paragraph essay for English class.
- The final draft reads like a story he would be telling you and is more clearly a reflection of this student's world view, based on the people he's met and the specific experiences he's had. One thing seems to naturally flow from the next.
- The final draft really allows us to peek into his world and the depths of his experiences. His world view (not to mention his essay) is more believable after he's shared with us where he comes from, philosophically and literally. The essay works because he really lets us into his world by lifting the veil on the rich details of his beliefs and his life experiences.

