Your personal statement can be one of the most important components of your law school applications in addition to your LSAT score and GPA.
Writing Personal Statements

Continued

DOs and DON'Ts When Writing a Personal Statement

Pay Attention to Each School’s Prompt

Hopefully, for most applicants, this is a no-brainer. The prompt for each school is first available in August/September when law schools release that year’s application. The prompts typically don’t change much year to year, so you can get a head start by looking at the previous year’s application. For many/most applicants, the prompts are similar enough that the same personal statement template can be used with minor adjustments for each school (see Tip #2 on personalization). For some applicants, however, the prompts are different enough that you should write multiple personal statements. Be sure that the personal statement you use for a school does in fact respond to the prompt for that school. The ability to follow directions is a necessity for law school applicants.

Personalize Your Statement

Law schools want to see that you have put time and effort into researching why that school is a good fit for you. One of the ways you can demonstrate your due diligence is to include a paragraph (typically at the close of your personal statement) outlining several specific factors that have drawn you to that law school. Be specific. Important considerations to note:

(a) Vague statements asserting that a law school is a good fit for you without any supporting evidence or information are useless, so do your research and work on articulating the reasons for your interest in each school.
(b) You can review a school’s website to determine what you like about that school, but don’t just regurgitate information from the website. They want to know why that information is relevant to your interests and/or goals.
(c) Top-ranked schools (typically, top 5 or so) pretty much know why you would like to attend, so personalization is less important unless there is something that truly differentiates that school from others to you.
(d) Some schools have a separate “optional” essay allowing you to discuss why you want to attend that school. If that is the case for one of your schools, write the separate essay, and omit the personalized paragraph from your personal statement.
(e) Be sure to submit the correct versions to each school. Save the school’s name in the title to help minimize any potential for error.

Tell a Story

Another easy way to be both personal and persuasive in your personal statement is to start off with an anecdote about yourself that sets up the framework for the rest of the statement. For example, if you are highlighting certain characteristics in your statement, tell an anecdote that demonstrates those characteristics. If you are discussing a defining moment in your life, describe a scene from that experience. A well-told anecdote can immediately capture readers’ attention and draw them into your world. Even if you don’t include an anecdote in the statement, the topic that you choose should, in a sense, “tell a story” about you in a way that captures and keeps the reader’s attention.

Be Concise

Some schools set no limit for personal statements, but most suggest either 2–3 or 2–4 pages. Aim for two pages, double-spaced. Do not make the error of thinking that more is better. Law schools value the ability to persuasively convey information in a relatively short space. Also, keep in mind that admissions committees are reviewing thousands of applications. Don’t waste their time.

10 DON’Ts

1. DON’T just restate your résumé in narrative form. That shows no critical thinking ability. If you are going to talk about more than one achievement or experience mentioned on your résumé, then connect the dots. Find a common theme that ties those items together.

2. DON’T address your weaknesses in the personal statement. Use an addendum. The personal statement should highlight the positives about you.

3. DON’T focus on your high school activities or accomplishments. Focusing on achievements in college.

4. DON’T be overly dramatic. Understatement is better.

5. DON’T spend too much time talking about someone or something else.

6. DON’T start your statement with a famous quotation, no matter how well you think it might fit with the theme of your personal statement. Admissions committees want to hear your words, not those of someone else.

7. DON’T use legal or Latin phrases.

8. DON’T be careless. Be sure not to accidentally mention the wrong school in your statement.

9. DON’T use big words in an effort to impress the admissions committees. It sets the wrong tone for the statement.

10. DON’T write a position paper or opinion piece. Even written well, those types of writings are not particularly useful to admissions committees because they miss the point of the personal statement.

“…look favorably upon applicants who can be a bit reflective in the personal statement—they not only describe their life experiences, but how those experiences shaped them and why they are important. Have those experiences influenced the applicant and, perhaps, helped define his or her goals and aspirations. You either have this insight or you don’t. If you are able to draft this type of essay, it can be extremely powerful because it shows that you might have a more sophisticated view of the world and your role in it.”

Bill Hays, Associate Dean of Admissions, Duke University School of Law

“…it is fairly obvious to us when an applicant might make is to talk too much in their personal statement. It is so much more effective for an applicant to be concise, say what they have to say, make their point, and then stop talking.”

Andrew Comblatt, Dean of Admissions, Georgetown Law

“…is it fair to us when an applicant tries to be someone or something she is not, which is not only off-putting, but can also cast a shadow of doubt on other parts of your application. Be sure that when you talk about future goals, e.g., saving Alaskan whales, it is because you have a demonstrated interest in doing so and not simply because you might have gone on an Alaskan whale watching cruise. We really want to know you— who you are and what motivates you, albeit in two pages or less.”

Nkonye Iwerebon, Dean of Admissions, Columbia Law School

Brainstorming a Personal Statement

Your goal in brainstorming a personal statement is to find a core idea around which the statement will be centered. What will be the take away for admissions committees reading the statement? The take away shouldn’t be a list of your experiences or accomplishments. Go deeper. The take away should concern something more: key characteristics, skills, or abilities; lessons learned; personal growth; passions pursued; the impact of certain experiences; or qualities about you that indicate readiness for law school.

If you are having difficulty developing the core idea for your personal statement, consider these brainstorming ideas:

- Write down memorable episodes (even minor) from your life, then select those that best demonstrate something positive that you want to convey.
- Read the list of characteristics identified in the Center for Pre-Law Advising’s Requesting a Letter of Recommendation handout as ideal characteristics for successful law students. Which most closely describe you? What anecdotes best demonstrate those characteristics?
- Describe yourself in 6 words. What is it about you that comes to mind?
- Review your resume and think about the impact of each experience on your personal growth.

Good Advice from Law School Admissions Deans

“You could approach the personal statement as your opportunity to have ‘an interview’ with an admissions officer. If you had fifteen minutes, what question do you think it might fit with the theme of your personal statement, the topic that you choose should, in a sense, “tell a story” about you in a way that captures and keeps the reader’s attention.

Be Personable

As you now know, one of your goals as an applicant is to let admissions committees get to know you. It is just as important that they like you. Admissions committees are in no rush to admit applicants who are arrogant, pretentious, elitist, or rude. So the tone you use in your personal statement is important. Don’t assume that you need to use a formal tone just because you think lawyers write very formally. By using a formal tone, you are actually building a wall between yourself and the admissions committee—the opposite of what you should be doing. Aim for a more conversational (but not casual) tone so that the statement flows easily for the reader. Further, forget the big words that you think make you sound smart. They actually risk making you sound arrogant, pretentious, or even un unintelligent (if used improperly). Strong writing conveys intelligence without the need for big words.

Ken Kleinrock, Associate Dean for Admissions, NYU Law