

Writing your law school personal statements



Center for Pre-Law Advising
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

What is the goal of a personal Statement?

The first step in the process of drafting a personal statement is to understand the many functions that personal statements serve for admissions committees.

• **First, and most importantly, the personal statement is your primary writing sample.** In fact, it may be one of only two writings that the admissions committees will receive from you—the other being the LSAT writing sample that you composed in a mere 35 minutes. Admissions committees want to know whether you are a strong writer, and they will evaluate your personal statement through this lens. Well-written personal statements should not only demonstrate that you are proficient in your use of the English language but should also demonstrate that you can be logical, persuasive, engaging, and concise.

• **Second, at most law schools, the personal statement is a proxy for an interview.** Only a handful of law schools offer interviews to applicants. For all other law schools, the personal statement is typically the only opportunity that the admissions committee has to get to know something more personal about you than is reflected elsewhere in your application. It is called a personal statement for a reason. It should make admissions committee members feel as though they have met you, and ideally, they will like who they have met.

• **Third, the personal statement gives the admissions committee greater insight into your critical thinking abilities.** Are you able to reflect on your life experiences and identify how one or more of those experiences has impacted you in some meaningful way? Critical thinking is an essential quality for law students and lawyers, and admissions committees, want to see you demonstrate that ability in your personal statement.

• **Fourth, the personal statement may give admissions committees a sense of your motivations for attending law school.** Was your decision to apply well reasoned or was it a result of not knowing what else to do after college? Admissions committees prefer to admit applicants who have come to the reasoned conclusion that law is the best career path for them.

• **Fifth, the personal statement can be a form of tie-breaker for applicants with similar numbers and experiences.** An applicant who has demonstrated critical thinking, persuasiveness, and writing ability may have the upper hand.

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

• **Finally, the personal statement is potential and needed relief for admissions committees that review thousands of applications over the course of the admissions cycle.** The other components of the application, while useful, can be dry and fatiguing to review in bulk. The personal statement is the one document that can bring life to an application file. Take advantage of that opportunity and give the admissions committees an engaging statement. It doesn't need to be the great American novel, but it should at least give admissions committees a pleasant break from the rest of the application review process. They will thank you.

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Getting started

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 should not be a list of your experiences or accomplishments. Go deeper. The takeaway 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.

"I think that the biggest error in judgment that 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."

- Georgetown Dean of Admissions Andrew Cornblatt

Personalize your statement

Most 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.

"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 hope would be asked? What story would you tell? What do you hope the interviewer would remember about you? The best statements are heartfelt, sincere, straightforward and above all, beautifully written."

- Former New York University Associate Dean of Admissions Kenneth Kleinrock

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.



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.

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 unintelligent (if used improperly). Strong writing conveys intelligence without the need for big words.

Tell a story

Another easy way to be both personal and personable 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.

"We...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. How 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."

- Duke Associate Dean of Admissions Bill Hoye

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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 because you will need to do so as a law student. Also, keep in mind that admissions committees are reviewing thousands of applications. Don't waste their time.

"It is fairly obvious to us when an applicant tries to be someone or something s/he 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."

- Columbia Dean of Admissions Nkonye Iwerebon

For further assistance, look to other campus resources

The details in your personal statement are crucial. One typo can ruin an otherwise great personal statement. While the Writing Center will not edit or proof read your statement, schedule an appointment because they will teach you to do so yourself.

The ten don'ts of personal statement writing

- 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 high school can draw attention to a lack of similar 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. Always bring the focus back to you.
- 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 legalese 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.