

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.

Personal Statements writing continued



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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

Personal Statements writing continued



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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.

Preparing your law school application résumé



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What to include

The primary purpose of a law school résumé is to quantify how you have spent your time outside the college classroom. As with the personal statement and letters of recommendation, the résumé will be important in those instances where an applicant's GPA and LSAT are neither outstanding nor terrible (i.e., the majority of applicants). You should include the following sections (the titles may vary by applicant):

- **Education:** Include post-high school institutions attended for one or more semesters, expected/actual graduation date and degree, major(s)/certificates, cumulative GPA, thesis/capstone, and academic honors/awards. You may alternatively include separate sections for honors/awards or research.
- **Work Experience:** Include post-high school employment and internships whether paid or unpaid—your titles, dates of employment, hours per week at each job, a brief summary of your employers (if not obvious from name), and detailed information concerning responsibilities and accomplishments at each job.
- **Activities:** Include all involvement with student organizations, athletics, volunteering other than an unpaid internship, and other activities to which you devote significant time. If you have few activities, consider including them in the education section instead.

You may also include the following sections if applicable:

- **Honors/Awards:** Include any recognition for academic or non-academic achievement or leadership—honor society membership, merit-based scholarships, etc. If you have only one or two honors and/or awards (e.g., dean's List), then it would be better to

include the item(s) in the education section.

- **Research:** If you have one or more items of research to highlight, it may be appropriate to include a separate section for research. Include substantive writings such as a thesis or capstone, significant work product for a directed study, and publications with or without a professor/TA as co-author, etc.
- **Skills/Interests:** This section allows you to highlight language skills, travel, and unique interests that may not fit elsewhere in your resume. *Note: It is okay for your résumé to exceed one page.*

The don'ts of résumé building

The following are a list of items you should not include on your résumé.

- **DON'T** include an objective section at the top. Your objective is obviously to get into law school.
- **DON'T** include honors or activities from high school even if you were class valedictorian, Eagle Scout, etc. The exception is something truly impressive like being in the Olympics.
- **DON'T** include detailed technical/scientific skills (e.g. a scientific antibody tagging technique).
- **DON'T** include administrative skills (e.g. Microsoft Office).
- **DON'T** include references. Your letters of recommendation are your references.
- **DON'T** exclude involvement with a fraternity or sorority. Greek organizations often provide significant opportunities for leadership and community service.
- **DON'T** exclude political/religious involvement out of a concern that you may alienate admissions committees. In fact, law schools want student bodies with a diversity of political/religious beliefs and experiences. But focus on the substance of your involvement, not the ideology of it.

Requesting transcripts for your law school applications



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Which transcripts do I need to request for my application?

You must submit transcripts documenting all academic coursework completed at the following types of institutions:

- Undergraduate and graduate institutions
- Community colleges
- Law/medical/professional institutions
- Institutions attended for summer or evening courses
- Institutions attended even though a degree was never received
- Institutions from which you took college-level courses while in high school even though they were for high school credit (different than AP coursework)
- Institutions that clearly sponsored your overseas study, which means:
 1. The courses received the sponsoring institution's academic credit (not transfer credit)
 2. The course codes, titles, credits earned, and grades appear on the sponsoring institution's transcript. Typically, these grades and credits are included in the sponsoring institution's cumulative GPA
- International institutions, if applicable (see <https://www.lsac.org/jd/applying-to-law-school/international-transcripts>).

Further, transcripts must be provided for an institution even if:

- Credit was transferred from an institution and it appears on another institution's transcript
- The institution is closed
- Withdraw, incomplete, etc., are the only grades listed, or you have just enrolled.

For additional information, visit: <https://www.lsac.org/jd/applying-to-law-school/cas/requesting-transcripts>

How do I request my transcript?

Submit a completed Transcript Request Form to the Registrar's Office of each undergraduate and graduate institution of higher education that you have attended, and pay any transcript request fees that the institution requires.

The Transcript Request Form is available in your LSAC account only after you (1) sign up and pay for the Credential Assembly Service (see Credential Assembly Service handout) and (2) add the institutions that you have attended in your LSAC account by clicking Add Institutions on the Credentials page. Your transcripts must be submitted to LSAC directly by your schools and should be accompanied by the Transcript Request Form. LSAC will not accept transcripts submitted directly by you, even if they are official copies.

It typically takes LSAC two weeks to process transcripts, so request transcripts from your schools at least four weeks before you plan to apply to law school. Go to <https://registrar.wisc.edu/transcript/> for more information on requesting UW-Madison transcripts.

How does the Law School Admissions Council summarize transcripts from multiple institutions?

LSAC calculates its own GPA for your undergraduate work at UW-Madison and also calculates a separate cumulative GPA for your entire set of undergraduate work at all institutions of higher education (including credits taken at a higher education institution during high school). With respect to these separate GPAs, LSAC has stated:

"There may be some variation between the GPAs calculated by LSAC and those calculated by colleges or students; however, the variation is rarely substantial. Because the law schools that use LSAC's Credential Assembly Service understand its procedures, a slight variation in GPA is not likely to affect a law school's admission decision."



What is CAS?

The Credential Assembly Service is a mandatory fee-based service provided by LSAC. For a one-time fee of \$185 (as of 2018), LSAC collects an applicant's required documentation (LSAT score, LSAT writing sample, letters of recommendation, and transcripts) and uses it to create a Law School Report for the applicant that is forwarded to law schools upon the schools' request. A CAS account is active for 5 years.

The Credential Assembly Service will cost you \$185 and each law school report will cost you \$35 (i.e. per school you apply to), as of April, 2018.

What is a law school report?

Once an applicant submits a completed application to a law school, the school then requests a Law School Report for that applicant from LSAC. The report includes a cover sheet summarizing the applicant's academic credentials (including all LSAT scores and a detailed breakdown of GPA) and encloses copies of the applicant's transcript(s), letters of recommendation, and LSAT writing sample(s). A law school application file is not considered complete until it contains a Law School Report. LSAC recommends that applicants sign up and pay for CAS at least 4–6 weeks before they plan to submit applications. Applicants should also try to submit their transcripts and letters of recommendation to LSAC several weeks before applying to law school. It typically takes 2 weeks for LSAC to process a transcript or letter of recommendation once received.

LSAC also charges \$35 for each Law School Report that it sends, which must be paid even if you have a fee waiver for an individual school.

LSAC CAS to-do list

1. Create an LSAC.org account if you have not yet done so at <https://os.lsac.org/Logon/Access.aspx>
2. Sign up for the Credential Assembly Service a minimum of 4–6 weeks before submitting your law school applications.
 - To sign up for CAS, log in to your LSAC account and click on Credentials under the Apply tab
 - At the bottom of the Credentials page is a button labeled Pay for CAS
 - Once you click on Pay for CAS, the registration fee will be added to your LSAC shopping cart. Check out to complete the purchase.
3. Add all institutions of higher education that you have attended for which you need to submit transcripts (see Requesting Transcripts handout) by clicking on Add Institutions at the bottom of the Credentials page.
4. Submit the application components necessary to complete your CAS file, including:
 - Transcripts should be requested using the LSAC Transcript Request Form available in your LSAC account after you pay the CAS fee (see Requesting Transcripts handout)
 - Letters of recommendation should be submitted directly to LSAC by your recommenders (see the Requesting Letters of Recommendation handout)
 - At least one LSAT score—after taking the LSAT, no further action is necessary on your part to add the score to your CAS file.
5. Pay the \$35 Law School Report fee for each law school to which you intend to apply (can be paid when you submit each application).
6. After submitting your applications, check your LSAC account periodically in order to confirm that LSAC sends a Law School Report to each of your schools. To do so, go to Applications then LSAC Completed. See the following sites:
 - <https://www.lsac.org/jd/help/faqs-cas>
 - <https://www.lsac.org/jd/applying-to-law-school/cas>



What is an optional essay?

Most law schools offer applicants the opportunity to submit additional information about themselves in the form of optional essays. Although these essays are termed “optional,” it is actually in your best interest to submit any essay for which you can articulate a strong, well-drafted response that provides relevant additional information. The most common two types of optional essays are: (1) a diversity statement and (2) a “Why ‘X’ Law School?” essay (see p. 2 for detailed explanations of each).

Some law schools may provide additional prompts to which you are permitted to respond. For example, Michigan Law suggests 8 topics, and applicants are permitted to submit up to 2..

Regardless of the nature of the essays, consider them an opportunity to round out your application and provide another writing sample.

What is an addendum?

The personal statement and optional essays are not the place to address weaknesses in your application. You should use addenda to provide context for any significant weaknesses or gaps in your application. An addendum is a brief, factual summary of the circumstances surrounding an element of your application that could raise a genuine question or concern for admissions committees. The following are common types of addenda:

- GPA addendum to address circumstances that contributed to a very low GPA in one particular class or during a certain semester or other defined period of time.
- LSAT addendum addressing multiple LSAT cancellations or a significant jump in LSAT score between two tests.
- Character and Fitness addendum addressing incidents of misconduct (required by most if not all schools).
- Absence addendum addressing a leave of 1+ semesters from college or a significant gap on your resume.

When are optional essays unnecessary?

- **DON'T** submit an optional essay if you really have nothing to say about the topic. Admissions committees only want additional material that is helpful to them in evaluating your application.
- **DON'T** submit an optional essay if you aren't willing to spend significant time drafting a strong essay. Admissions committees do not want you to go through the mechanical process of drafting and submitting materials without putting significant thought and effort into them.
- **DON'T** write a diversity statement unless you can articulate both (1) a genuinely diverse perspective, and also (2) how your diversity has shaped you or how it will benefit your fellow classmates' learning experience.

When are addenda unnecessary?

- **DON'T** use addenda to address minor weaknesses. You risk drawing attention to weaknesses and making them seem more significant than they truly are.
- **DON'T** use an LSAT addendum to explain that you were scoring much higher on your practice tests. Law schools only care what happens on test day. But you may describe significant events that negatively impacted your test-day score.
- **DON'T** use an addendum to assign blame for misconduct or poor grades elsewhere. Explain the circumstances, take responsibility, then end on a positive note—briefly state what you learned from the situation.
- **Remember: Use good judgment when deciding whether an addendum is needed.**



Common optional essay one: diversity statements

A “diversity statement” is a common type of optional essay that encourages applicants to reflect on any personal diversity that they may contribute if selected as a member of the incoming class. The most important thing to realize is that “diversity” is interpreted broadly by law school admissions offices and is not limited to race or ethnicity.

Diversity includes any element of your identity, circumstances, or experiences that you believe may give you a diverse perspective from fellow classmates or a different lens through which you view the world. Relevant types of diversity may include (but are not limited to) race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religious identification, sexual orientation, military experience, single parenting, nontraditional age, underrepresented major (e.g., STEM majors), or first-generation student status. It is not, however, sufficient to merely identify a type of diversity.

You should go one step further and articulate (1) how that diversity has impacted you personally and (2) why it may give you a unique perspective that enriches the law school class. It is not easy to articulate why your diversity matters, so it may take significant time to prepare a solid first draft. If you don't feel that you have a meaningful type of diversity, then don't submit a diversity statement. More importantly, don't stress about not submitting a diversity statement! It is truly an optional statement and you will not be penalized for choosing not to submit one.

Common optional essay two: Why “X School of Law”?

Many law schools offer applicants the opportunity to use a separate “Why ‘X Law School’?” essay in order to articulate specific reasons why the applicant believes the school would be a strong fit.

Presumably, if you are applying to a school, there were reasons that led you to apply to that school above other similarly situated law schools. So if a school permits such an essay, you should make the effort to write one. Start first by identifying your actual reasons for applying, then do more research. What classes would you be most interested in taking? What clinics interest you? Does the school have a particular focus or philosophy that you appreciate (e.g., law and economics, law in action)? Does the school place a significant number of graduates in the area in which you are most interested (e.g., public interest law, “big law”)? Does it have smaller class sizes than the average law school?

By providing evidence of your strong interest in a school and of an appropriate fit, you can increase your likelihood of admission. So do your research, but don't just regurgitate information from the website or other sources. Internalize the information, and reflect on why that information is important to you. If you truly can't find something substantive to say about the school, reconsider applying there.

“[P]art of what we value—and that we actually evaluate for—is capacity for good judgment. And one way to display good judgment is in the decision that one makes in what essays to submit, whether you do optional essays, whether you submit addenda, and whether those optional essays and addenda are actually useful to us... [T]hese are invitations to submit information if you have something important to say. And really, it's not at all expected, and it actually could be harmful to actually submit several addenda that speak to different issues, that really don't provide much helpful information other than what's there already.”

- Duke Associate Dean of Admissions Bill Hoye



What is the goal of a letter of recommendation?

One of the aims of the law school admissions process is to identify those individuals who have the intellectual and personal characteristics necessary to succeed in the law school classroom. To determine capacity to succeed, law schools rely on a variety of proxies including undergraduate GPA, LSAT score, and letters of recommendation.

In short, law schools want to know how you will perform in the law school classroom, and letters of recommendation from academic sources can inform law schools how you performed in the undergraduate classroom. Because law schools believe that your performance in the college classroom is a potential indicator of your ability to handle the rigors of law school coursework, they prefer letters from academic sources, including professors and TAs.

The academic title of the person writing the letter matters less than the substance of what they have to say about you. If the TA in a course can better speak to your abilities in the classroom, then you should request a letter from the TA rather than the professor.

In some cases, it may be appropriate to request one or more letters of recommendation from professionals who have supervised you in the workplace.

Letters from academic sources are always preferable, but law schools understand that individuals who have been in the workplace for some time may not be able to secure letters of recommendation from former instructors.

Similarly, some applicants may wish to supplement their academic letters of recommendation with a professional letter highlighting intellectual or other characteristics demonstrated during a job or internship.

When determining whom to approach for a letter of recommendation, you should identify individuals who have observed and can enthusiastically speak to characteristics that indicate your capacity to succeed in law school, including for example:

1. **Intellectual Capacity:** Analytical thinking, critical thinking, critical reading, reasoning skills, problem-solving skills, intellectual curiosity, capacity for abstract thought, etc.
2. **Ability to Communicate:** Strong writing and/or verbal skills, persuasiveness, articulateness, participation in class discussions, etc.
3. **Other Characteristics:** Motivation, diligence, maturity, organization, responsibility, attention to detail, professionalism, self-discipline, character integrity, leadership, etc.

Letters of recommendation are an important component of the law school admissions process. Most law schools require 1–2 letters, but as a general rule, it is ideal to submit 2–3 strong letters. This handout provides an overview of the process of requesting letters of recommendation.



Requesting a Letter of Recommendation for law school

Letters of recommendation turn on relationships. To receive a strong letter of recommendation, you need to have devoted time to developing a strong relationship with the recommender. Be respectful of that relationship when you request letters of recommendation, and consider the following advice:

1. Request your letters of recommendation in person if at all possible (face-to-face or by telephone). Don't use e-mail unless your purpose is to set up a meeting or telephone conversation. A personal conversation gives you an additional opportunity to impress the recommender and helps ensure that the recommender has sufficient information about you to include in the letter.
2. Don't wait until the last minute to request your letters. Give your recommenders sufficient time to prepare their letters (ideally 6–8 weeks), and set deadlines at least 2–4 weeks before any application deadline. Recommenders may not write as strong of a letter or may miss their deadline if not given sufficient time to prepare the letter.
3. Provide your recommenders with a packet of information on which they can rely when drafting the letter. Include a résumé and work product from the course or a summary of work from the job/internship. If the recommender has not written a letter of recommendation for law school before, include a copy of the handout Writing a Letter of Recommendation.

Submitting a Letter of Recommendation for law school

Most law schools require applicants to have their recommenders submit letters of recommendation directly to LSAC. In order to do so, you should first add your recommenders in your LSAC account by following the steps indicated in the adjacent text block (How to Add a Recommender in Your LSAC Account). You may then elect to have your recommenders use one of the following two procedures to submit their letters:

Electronic Process

After adding your recommenders to your LSAC account, you can initiate the electronic submission process by clicking the E-mail button to the right of the recommenders' names on the Letters of Recommendation and Evaluations page in your LSAC account. LSAC will then e-mail your recommenders directly with information concerning the process for submitting a letter electronically. Be sure to personally contact your recommenders first in order to determine their willingness to provide a letter.

U.S. Mail Process

For recommenders who may not be comfortable using the electronic process, there is a paper option. To initiate this process, print your recommender's form by clicking the Print button to the right of the recommender's name on the Letters of Recommendation and Evaluations page in your LSAC account. Next, provide that form to the recommender for inclusion with the letter of recommendation. Be sure to provide a stamped envelope for the recommender's convenience.

"Professors notice your actions, both good and bad. While texting, missing class, and sleeping obviously won't...



Dos and Don'ts when choosing a recommender

DO:

1. Choose recommenders with sufficient first person knowledge of your academic or professional abilities and characteristics. Family friends do not meet this standard unless they are also a former instructor or supervisor of yours.
2. Try your best to identify two academic sources for letters of recommendation since law schools prefer this type of letter. Ideal sources include professors of one or more classes, thesis advisors, professors of independent study courses, seminar professors, or TAs for discussion sections.
3. Choose recommenders who will be enthusiastic about your good qualities and will go to bat for you.

DON'T:

1. Don't choose a recommender just because of his or her title. Law schools aren't impressed by boilerplate letters from senators, judges, CEOs, etc. The same principle applies to academics. A letter from a TA will carry more weight if the TA knows you better than the professor.
1. Don't choose someone if you are unsure whether the person will write a strong letter. Don't be afraid to ask if the person is comfortable writing a strong letter.
2. Don't feel that you have to choose a professor/TA in your major or from a law-related course. The course subject matter is less important than the writer's knowledge of you.

How to add a recommender to your LSAC account

STEP 1: Log in to your LSAC account at www.lsac.org.

STEP 2: Click on Letters of Recommendation/Evaluations under Credential Assembly Service.

STEP 3: Click on the blue button labeled Add/Edit My Recommenders/Evaluators.

STEP 4: Click on the blue button labeled Add NEW Recommender/Evaluator.

STEP 5: Click on Recommender Only. Note: Very few schools require Evaluations, and most prefer Letters of Recommendation.

STEP 6: Complete all blanks in the sections labeled Recommender/Evaluator Information and Recommender Contact Information, including ones that are not required but may be relevant (e.g., title, e-mail address).

STEP 7: In the section labeled Letter Information, indicate how many unique letters the Recommender will be providing. In most circumstances, recommenders only provide one, and LSAC sends it to all of the applicant's designated law schools. If your recommender has a personal connection to one of the schools you are applying to, you may wish to ask them to write a separate letter to that school discussing the additional topic of why you would be a strong fit. In that case, you would indicate 2 letters from that recommender.

STEP 8: Add a letter description. In most cases, the description will merely say, "All Law Schools." If a letter is personalized for one law school, indicate that here.

"... help you, actively participating in class, going to office hours, and asking questions can make a difference and demonstrate the characteristics that make a good letter."

- CPLA Advisor Caroline Fuchs



This guidance is intended for academics and professionals who have been asked to submit a letter of recommendation on behalf of a law school applicant. Please note that family members or family friends are not ideal sources for letters of recommendation.

The dos and don'ts when writing a letter of recommendation

DO:

1. Provide context for how you know the applicant and how long you have known the applicant.
2. If you taught the applicant, provide information on the nature of the class(es). Was the course particularly demanding? What was required of students in the course?
3. Be specific. Provide examples of times that you observed relevant characteristics. Refer to specific work product if possible (e.g., thesis, research project, significant writings, presentations).
4. Evaluate the applicant in general relation to other classmates or employees (top 10 percent, etc.). To the extent possible, quantify the applicant's strengths

DON'T:

1. Don't speak in generalities. Vague statements are not useful to admissions committees.
2. Don't merely recite the applicant's résumé in narrative form. The applicant will submit a résumé as part of the application.
3. If you supervise the applicant, don't focus on trade-specific skills. Instead, focus on the applicant's broader skill sets—how the applicant thinks and communicates and whether the applicant has other qualities.
4. Don't agree to write a letter if you do not believe that you have a sufficient basis on which to evaluate the applicant.

How to submit a law school letter of recommendation

The Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) serves as a central hub for the law school admissions process and is the intermediary between academic or professional individuals who draft letters of recommendation and the law schools to which an applicant has applied. All letters of recommendation on behalf of a law school applicant must be submitted formally to LSAC through one of the following two procedures:

Electronic Process

If an applicant has elected to solicit letters of recommendation through LSAC's electronic process, the applicant will request LSAC to contact you via e-mail to invite you to submit your letter electronically. The applicant should have contacted you personally first in order to determine your willingness to provide a letter. After receiving the e-mail from LSAC, you will create an LSAC account if you have not previously done so. The procedure for creating an account and the process for submitting the letter will be laid out in the e-mail from LSAC.

U.S. Mail Process

For those writers of letters of recommendation who are not comfortable submitting a letter electronically, there is a paper option. If you prefer this method, the applicant should print and give you a form that you must enclose with the letter of recommendation in a mailing to LSAC. The address to which you should send the letter and form is provided on the form itself.

I applied to law school. What happens now?



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General process overview

1. What happens now?

When you submit an application on the LSAC website, LSAC time stamps the application and prepares it for the school to download. LSAC may also send a paper copy if the school still maintains paper files for applicants. This process may take anywhere from 1 day to several weeks in certain circumstances. For example, some law schools may request LSAC not to forward completed applications until the Law School Report for the applicant is ready. (Unsure what a Law School Report is? See Credential Assembly Service handout.) Once a law school has received an application through LSAC, it will begin a process of review to ensure that all requisite components are included in the application file. This initial review process may conclude relatively quickly, or in some cases it may take several weeks, depending to a great extent on the volume of applications being processed by the school at that time. To give applicants some insight into the seeming black box of the admissions process, many law schools offer an Online Status Check website. For example, the University of Wisconsin's Status Checker website informs applicants when an application is received from LSAC, when an application is placed in the queue for review by the admissions committee, when the committee begins its review, and when a decision has been reached. If you are accepted, most schools will communicate that information to you by phone call or e-mail. If you are placed on hold, placed on a wait list, or rejected, you will receive an e-mail and/or letter at your address on record.

2. How soon before I hear back?

There is, unfortunately, no specific answer to this question. In rare cases, some applicants may receive an answer within a few weeks, but the process typically takes 2–4 months. If your application is placed on hold or if you are placed on a wait list then it may take several additional months to receive a final decision. In the meantime, continue to check the online status check for each school, and check your LSAC account to confirm that each school has requested a Law School Report from LSAC within a few weeks after you submitted your application.

What do the different statuses mean?

1. What is a wait list?

A wait list (or reserve list as some schools refer to it) is comprised of applicants who the admissions committee has determined are academically qualified to attend the school, but the admissions committee is not yet prepared to offer the applicants a spot in the incoming class for various reasons. The manner in which law schools use wait lists varies significantly school-by-school and year-by-year. Some schools admit applicants off the wait list even before the deadline to apply has passed. Others wait until after the first seat deposit deadline (the deadline for admitted students to pay a fee to hold their seat in the incoming class) has passed to admit applicants from the wait list. In more competitive years, law schools may not admit anyone from the wait list. In the 2013 admissions cycle, for example, law schools admitted a significant number of applicants from their wait lists, while in more competitive years they have admitted a smaller number of applicants from wait lists. The proportions can vary greatly.

In general, law schools tend not to rank or order the applicants on their wait lists. Even those schools that do rank wait list applicants tend to do so using general quartiles or broad categories of priority. It varies school-by-school as to whether the school will inform an applicant where he/she stands on the wait list.

2. What is a hold?

A law school's decision to place a student on hold is not really a decision at all. Think of it more as a notification that there will be a delay in the school's processing of your application. The school might later decide to admit you, reject you, or place you on a wait list. It is difficult to read any meaning into the use of a hold on an application.

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How to increase your wait list odds

When you are placed on a wait list, most law schools will request you to return a form confirming your desire to remain on the wait list. While it is important that you take this step, merely returning the form is not sufficient in order to be admitted from the wait list at many schools. Law schools often will not admit someone from the wait list unless the applicant has advocated for his or her admission in some way. Note, however, that some law schools specifically instruct applicants placed on the wait list not to submit any supplementary materials or take any steps in an effort to gain admission. If you are placed on a wait list, it will be your responsibility to determine what a school permits from wait-listed applicants. If you are allowed, consider taking one of the following steps:

1. Submit One or More Letters of Continuing Interest

Letters of continuing interest are one-page business-style letters in which you may (1) update the school on relevant information post-dating your application (new academic awards, employment promotions, fall semester grades, etc.) and (2) explain in greater detail why you want to attend this particular law school. It is probably intuitive that updating the school on relevant, recent developments of note may help you stand out in comparison to others on the wait list. The importance of talking about why you want to attend that particular law school or, phrased differently, why the law school is a good fit for you, may be less intuitive. In most cases, law schools want to extend an offer of admission only to wait list applicants who are very likely to accept that offer. By articulating the basis for your desire to attend the school, you are evidencing that you have devoted thought and research in your decision to apply to this particular school and are therefore more likely to accept an offer. Even more useful, if you are sure that you would accept an offer from the school, say so explicitly in the LOCI. It is appropriate to send multiple LOCIs if you remain on the wait list for an extended period. Sending one per month is not unreasonable and allows you to assure the school that nothing has occurred in the interim that impacts your desire to attend.

2. Submit an Additional Letter of Recommendation

Many schools will accept one or more additional letters of recommendation from applicants placed on the wait list. If your school does accept them, remember that academic letters are more helpful to admissions committees.

3. Submit Any Optional Essays Suggested By the School

If a law school allows you to submit an optional essay, you should take the time to write a strong essay. It helps to convey the seriousness of your interest and gives the admissions committee another writing sample to evaluate.

4. Set Up a Formal Visit

Visiting a school conveys the seriousness of your interest in the school. In many cases, it may also lead to face time with an admissions representative, which can be helpful.

Wait list logistics

Applicants usually remain on a wait list long after the seat deposit deadlines have passed at the other schools where the applicants were accepted. If you are wait listed at School A, you will need to decide whether there is a School B you would be willing to attend if you aren't admitted at School A or whether you will wait and apply again to School A the following application cycle. If you are sure that you want to attend law school the upcoming fall regardless of whether you are admitted from the wait list at School A, then submit a seat deposit at School B. This is a common practice, and it raises no ethical issues if you get off the wait list at School A and decide to attend there instead. The only drawback to placing a seat deposit at School B is that you may lose the deposit if you get off the wait list at School A; not all schools refund seat deposits.

The second logistical issue arises if Schools A and B are in different cities. If you are still on the wait list at School A in August, you will likely need to sign a contract for housing near School B. If you do so, be conscious of any penalty clauses for breaking that contract, a necessary step if you are later admitted off the wait list at School A. You would also need to arrange to move your belongings quickly.

General tips for your law school applications



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Use good judgment

This is the most difficult tip to articulate with specificity, but it is still an important one to keep in mind. If you make a choice that demonstrates poor judgment in your law school application, law schools may become concerned about your suitability for admission. A glaring example of poor judgment is the use of profanity in an application. A more common example of poor judgment is the submission of application materials that were obviously written and submitted hastily without sufficient thought or editing.

Be concise

As a general principle, more is not better when drafting law school applications. If you can communicate the essential points of your personal statement in two pages, then you should do so. As a general rule, optional essays should be approximately one page or less. Addenda should be approximately one paragraph. Certain circumstances may justify writing beyond these limits. If you are uncertain whether the length of a document is appropriate, contact the Center for Pre-Law Advising.

Avoid vague statements

When following Tip #1, don't fall into the trap of trying to save space by making broad statements that are not supported by facts. If you make a statement, you should provide information logically supporting that statement. For example, don't state that you want to go to a certain school because it is a good fit without identifying the factors forming the basis for your conclusion that it is a good fit. Don't state that you want to practice a certain area of law unless you can point to significant work with similar issues in the past. Don't state that you want to go to law school in order to "make a difference" or to "impact society." These types of statements are too broad to have any real meaning in the absence of additional detail.

Don't apply to early or too late

Applications are typically available around the beginning of September, and deadlines typically range from February to April. Almost all law schools use a rolling admissions process, so it is not in your best interest to wait until a school's application deadline to apply. In competitive years, law schools have much less flexibility in the number of qualified applicants they can admit and merit-based financial aid they can offer at the end of the application cycle. Aim to apply by Thanksgiving/ early December unless circumstances arise that justify delaying your application. There is, however, no need to rush to be one of the first to submit your application. Take your time and do it right. Admissions offices are busy in the fall and may not read early applications until November or later. Note that there may be a slight advantage if you apply through a formal Early Decision program, but you will be bound to accept an offer regardless of the amount of financial aid offered.

Procedural Tips

1. Document Headers. In the header at the top of each document (other than the résumé), add your name, LSAC number, and a brief title for the document (e.g., Personal Statement). Don't get too creative with a title.
2. File Type. Convert Word documents to PDF before submitting to ensure that edits and comments are not visible to the admissions committees.
3. Document Naming. If the document has been personalized to a particular school, include that school in the name of the document to ensure that you submit the correct version of the document to the correct law school. Law school admissions offices frequently note the number of applications they receive that reference a different school.
4. Editing. Spell check, spell check, spell check. Then print and proofread your documents again to ensure proper word usage. Printing and reviewing documents leads to greater accuracy in editing than reviewing documents on a computer screen.