

WRITING A WINNING PERSONAL STATEMENT

The personal statement is, for many law school admissions professionals, the third most important piece of the application puzzle. It is where admissions committees get the opportunity to find out who you are apart from the numbers and other things they have seen in your application. Some admissions professionals have described it as “the glue that holds the file together.”

Purpose of the statement

For the applicant, the statement has many advantages. It is your “voice” in the process.

1. It serves as your personal introduction to the admissions committee. Because most law schools do not interview, the personal statement becomes your interview on paper. It is your chance to show yourself as more than just grades and test scores.
2. It gives you the opportunity to highlight particular aspects of your application that may not have gotten sufficient attention elsewhere.
3. It is a sample of your writing ability.

Content of the statement

The personal statement is the only part of the application process that you control from start to finish. Therefore, there is some leeway in terms of topics for your essay. However, the first and most important determinant of content is the essay question itself. Many students are under the false impression that they will be able to write one blanket statement for all law schools that they apply to. This is not necessarily true and you should be prepared to craft separate essays for separate programs as needed.

The first rule of writing the personal statement is **always read the question!** Be sure that you understand the question and all parts of it. Are you clear on what is being asked of you? If not, call the school and speak with an admissions professional to be sure. Some schools will ask general questions that call for the applicant to simply tell the admissions committee something that they would like the committee to know about. Others, however, ask very specific questions and need to be addressed accordingly. **Make sure that you answer the question that is asked!**

As for the general essay, what should you write about? Well, no one can tell you exactly what you should write about, but there are some general guidelines and hints for successfully choosing a topic:

- Try to discuss truly unique experiences that set you apart from other candidates. The goal of law school admissions committees is to craft a class of students who can contribute to the overall diversity of the school. This includes more than just ethnic and racial diversity. Think outside the typical “diversity box.”

- You do not have to spend the essay telling the admissions committee why you want to be a lawyer or why you want to go to law school. Although you should certainly touch on your desire for a legal education at some point during the statement, it does not need to be the main topic of your essay.
- Ask yourself thought-provoking questions that give insight into who you are individually. You want to show the committee what you can bring to the table that no one else can.
- Avoid negativity in your statement. The personal statement is not the place to address poor grades or LSAT scores unless they are part of the bigger story that you are telling. The personal statement is a “No Whine Zone.” If you feel that you need to address some discrepancy or flaw in your application, attach a separate addendum for this purpose.
- Be careful with creative approaches to your essay. These can backfire quickly. Do not attempt humor in your statement, even if that is your personality. The application to law school is a serious business and you want to come across as a serious applicant. Many admissions professionals admit that when an applicant attempts humor in their essay, it usually just comes across as immature.
- Avoid the “I’ve always wanted to be a lawyer” routine. This type of essay is very generic and overly used. The point is to make your essay stand out, not bore the reader to sleep or annoy them with another mundane essay that they’ve read hundreds of times already.
- Your statement should not be a narrative resume. Focus on one or a couple of key experiences or qualities.

Writing style and other technical issues

At its very base, the personal statement is, in fact, a sample of your writing abilities. Admissions committees will view it as such. Just as you would take great care with an essay for class, you need to take great care with your essay for law school:

- Your writing style should be clear and concise. The reader should not have to struggle or reread sentences to grasp your meaning. This is highly frustrating to a tired admissions professional who is reviewing your file at 10:00 at night after a long, exhaustive day of reading other files.
- In general, statements are approximately two pages, double-spaced. However, some schools will give applicants more space than this. Whatever the length guidelines are, you should be sure to adhere to them. **Two pages means two pages, not two and one-half pages!!** By not following the length guidelines, you give the committee the impression that you don’t know how to follow directions.

- Do not try to impress the reader with the use of big words. You would do better using simple, clear language.
- Grammar, punctuation, and spelling are just as important as content. As a lawyer, you will have to show strong attention to detail. Your ability to do that at the point of entry to law school is an important trait to demonstrate. **Proofread your essay, proofread it again, and then proofread it one more time. Then, give it to others to proofread some more!**
- Try using varied sentence structure to liven up your essay. Reading sentences in the same format over and over again is dull and boring.
- Introductions are key!!! You must grab your reader's attention in the first few seconds or your essay runs the risk of being skimmed or, at the least, unmemorable.
- Conclusions are big, too! Don't leave the essay hanging. Bring it full circle.
- Try using both narrative and expository writing style in your essay for variety. A good way to pull the reader into the essay is to begin in a narrative format by telling a story or writing a dialogue and then stepping back to write the rest of the essay as the narrator.

Starting to write- the dreaded first draft

Before you begin writing your statement, take some time to do some reflective introspection. Ask yourself thought-provoking questions that give insight into who you are individually. The answers to these questions will be important in helping draft your essay. In conducting this exercise of reflection and introspection, you want to be sure to address four key points:

1. Past experiences
2. Present motivations
3. Future goals
4. Enduring qualities

At the point where you begin to write your first draft, do not stifle yourself by trying to write the perfect essay on the first go-round. IT WILL NOT HAPPEN! Most law school applicants go through many, many revisions of their statement before they arrive at a finished product that they are satisfied with. Free-write your first draft. Just allow yourself to write whatever comes out on the page. Don't worry about appropriateness or length at this point. Just write!

After you finish your first draft, read through it and see what you've come up with. Glean out the most important information and rework it for a second draft. Or, you may decide

that you want to start over. The point is that each draft will get you closer to your desired goal of a statement that is truthful, unique, and a reflection of your character.

As you go through drafts of your statement, have others look it over, especially your Pre-Law Advisor. Although you should begin the process of self-reflection in the junior year, the ideal time to begin writing your statement is during the summer after your junior year. This will give you the opportunity to work on the essay without the interruptions of other class assignments.

Questions To Ask Yourself Before You Begin Writing

Past experiences

What (or who) have been the most important influences in my life?

What is my greatest accomplishment to date?

What is my biggest mistake or failure to date?

What is the best decision I've ever made?

What is the most important lesson I've learned in life?

What is the most unusual thing I've ever done?

Present Motivations

Why do I want to go to law school?

What do I hope to gain from pursuing a legal education?

Future Goals

What are my future goals (personal and professional)?

Where do I see myself in 5 years? 10 years? 20 years?

Enduring Qualities

What is the most unique thing about me?

If my best friend had to describe me in three words, what would he/she say?

What personal qualities am I most proud of?

Are there parts of myself that I keep hidden from others or have hidden in the past?

Sample Admissions Essay Questions

“The admissions committee gives careful attention to your personal statement. We are particularly interested in your motivation for studying law, your academic background, and qualities you possess that may enhance the diversity of our student body. If you are a college senior or recent graduate, you may wish to mention your work history and extracurricular activities. If you have spent a year or more in the work force after college, tell us about your employment experience; enclose a resume to illustrate your chronological work history.” ***University of Southern California***

“(1) State your reason for desiring to obtain a legal education.

(2) The School of Law believes the overall educational environment of the law school may be enhanced by life experiences or personal characteristics which significantly add to the academic, cultural, ethnic, geographic, racial or socio-economic diversity of the diversity of the student population. You are invited to explain how your life experiences or personal characteristics would significantly add to the diversity of the student population and enhance the educational climate of the law school. If you choose to provide such a statement, please do so on a separate supplemental sheet.”

University of Georgia

“The Emory law school requires the submission of a Personal Statement. The statement should describe any unusual aspects of your background that might provide an element of diversity in the law school. You should also describe any skills or traits that you have had an opportunity to develop to an unusual level. Discuss as well any significant activities or work experience that might enrich your law study. The Personal Statement should not exceed two typed pages. Applicants will disadvantage themselves by disregarding this limit.” ***Emory University***

“Personal Statement: You may write your personal statement on any subject of importance that you feel will assist us in our decision (please double-space).

Optional Statement: The Law Center recruits students from diverse racial, economic, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. Please feel free to attach a brief statement if you feel your personal background would enhance the student body.”

Georgetown Law Center

“Personal Statement: What significant personal, social, or academic experiences have contributed to your decision to study law? Please respond in two pages.

Optional Essay: In addition to your Personal Statement, you may wish to provide information regarding your ethnic, cultural, or family background that is relevant to your development. You may also choose to discuss particular achievements, including obstacles overcome, that have not already been addressed in this application. Please respond in one page.” ***Boston University***

“While the Committee on Admissions does not use interviews as part of the selection process, we would like to give you the opportunity to include more information about yourself than the application form conveys. Because people and their interests vary, we will leave the content and length of your statement to your discretion. You may wish to complete or clarify your responses to items on the application form, bring to our attention additional information you feel should be considered, describe important or unusual aspects of yourself not otherwise apparent in your application, or tell us what led you to apply to NYU School of Law.” ***New York University***

“Enclose a statement of about two pages describing important or unusual aspects of yourself not otherwise apparent in your application. If you would like the committee to consider how factors such as your background, life and work experiences, advanced studies, extracurricular or community activities, culture, class, race ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation would contribute to the diversity of the entering class and hence to your classmates’ law school experience, please describe these factors and their relevance.” ***Stanford University***

“Candidates to Columbia Law School are required to submit a personal essay or statement supplementing required application materials. Such a statement may provide the Admissions Committee with information regarding such matters as: personal, family, or educational background; experiences and talents of special interest; one’s reasons for applying to law school as they relate to personal goals and professional expectations; or any other factors that you think should inform the Committee’s evaluation of your candidacy for admission.” ***Columbia University***

“Write an essay of not more than 250 words about a subject of your choice.

Optional: Please add to this application whatever additional material you believe will enable admissions readers to make a fully informed judgment on your application. Many applicants include the personal statement they have prepared for other law school applications. Examples of issues you might choose to address are personal goals, history of standardized testing, or special circumstances involving your educational development and achievement. The admissions file readers especially welcome statements that enable them to understand the contribution your personal background would make to the student body at Yale Law School; such statements might concern, for example, your racial or ethnic identity or your socioeconomic background.” ***Yale Law School***

“Michigan’s talented student body is one of the Law School’s richest resources. Each entering class is composed of exceptionally accomplished people who bring a vast spectrum of experiences and perspectives to the Law School community. To aid in constructing a diverse and interesting class, we require a personal statement. This statement provides you with an opportunity to demonstrate the ways in which you can contribute your talents and experiences to the Law School. Successful applicants have elaborated on significant personal, academic, and professional experiences; meaningful intellectual interests and extracurricular activities; factors inspiring them to obtain a legal education; and significant obstacles, challenges, or disadvantages met and overcome.” (Also has six optional essays; applicants may write up to two of them).
University of Michigan