



# Six Law School Personal Statements That Got Into Harvard

BY [DAVID BUSIS](#)

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The essays below, which were all part of successful applications to Harvard Law, rely on humble reckonings followed by reflections. Some reckonings are political: an applicant grapples with the 2008

financial crisis; another grapples with her political party's embrace of populism. Others are personal: a student struggles to sprint up a hill; another struggles to speak clearly. The writers have different ideologies, different ambitions, and different levels of engagement with the law. Yet all of them come across as thoughtful, open to change, and ready to serve.

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### Essay 1: Sea Turtles

I stood over the dead loggerhead, blood crusting my surgical gloves and dark green streaks of bile from its punctured gallbladder drying on my khaki shorts. It was the fifth day of a five-week summer scholarship at the University of Chicago's Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL), and as I shuffled downwind of the massive creature, the pungent scent of its decomposition wafted toward me in the hot summer breeze. Aggressive flies

buzzed around my head, occasionally pausing to land on the wad of plastic we had extracted from the loggerhead's stomach. The plastic had likely caused a blockage somewhere, and the sea turtle had died of malnutrition. When the necropsy was finished, we discarded the remains in a shallow hole under a thicket of trees, and with the last shovel of sand over its permanent resting place, its death became just another data point among myriad others. Would it make a difference in the long, arduous battle against environmental pollution? Probably not. But that dead loggerhead was something of a personal tipping point for me.

I have always loved the clean, carefully objective nature of scientific research, but when I returned to the US from my native XXXX to study biology, I began to understand that because of this objectivity, scientific data rarely produces an emotional effect. It is difficult to initiate change based on such a passive approach. My ecology professor used to lament that it was not science that would determine the fate of the environment, but politics. The deeper I delved into research, the more I agreed with her. Almost every day, I came across pieces of published research that were incorrectly cited as evidence for exaggerated conclusions and used, for

example, as a rebuttal against climate change. Reality meant nothing when pitted against a provocative narrative. It was rather disillusioning at first, but I was never one to favor passivity. In an effort to better understand the issues, I began to look into the policy side of biological conservation. The opportunity at the MBL came at this juncture in my academic journey, and it was there that I received my final push to the path of law.

After weeks of sea turtle biology and policy debates at the MBL, we held a mock symposium on fishing and bycatch regulations. Participants were exclusively STEM majors, so before the debate even began, everyone in the room was already heavily in favor of reducing commercial fishing. I was assigned the role of the Chair of the New Bedford Division of Marine Fisheries, and my objective was clear: to represent the wishes of my constituents, and my constituents wanted more time out on the sea. However, that meant an increase in accidental bycatch, which could hurt endangered marine populations and fill up the bycatch quota for commercial fishermen before the season ended.

There were hundreds of pages of research data on novel technological innovations

for bycatch reduction that I had to wade through, but with the help of my group, I was able to piece together a net replacement plan that just barely satisfied my constituents, the scientists, and the industry reps. Although the issue of widespread net replacement incentives for the commercial fishermen remained, there was no doubt that I enjoyed the mental stimulus of tackling this hypothetical challenge. I was able to use my science background to aid in brokering a compromise that would reduce the amount of damage done to the environment without endangering the livelihood of the people involved in the industry.

By the end of the symposium, I knew that I wanted to bridge the gap between presenting scientific data correctly and effecting change in the policy world. Although there are many ways for me to advocate for change, I believe that only legal and legislative enforcements will have a widespread and lasting effect on the heavy polluters of the world. I want to combine my legal education and a solid foundation in the biological sciences to tackle the ever-growing slew of environmental challenges facing us in the twenty-first century.

The night the symposium ended, we patrolled the beach for nesting females. As I walked beneath the stars, I thought of that sea turtle and of the repeating migration of my own life, from my birthplace in XXXX to my childhood in the US, back to XXXX and now the US again. With the guidance of the Earth's magnetic fields, sea turtles are able to accurately return to their birthplace no matter how far they deviate, but I like to imagine that they, like me, do need to occasionally chart another course to get there. Standing on a beach in Woods Hole, thousands of miles from home, I knew that I was on the right path and ready to embark on a career in law.

#### Essay 2: Joining the Arsonists To Become a Fireman

On the morning of the 2004 presidential election, my sixth-grade teacher told me to watch out for John Kerry voters in the hallways because our school was a polling station. I nodded and went to the water fountain, thinking to myself that my parents were voting for John Kerry, and that as far as I could tell, they posed no risk to students. It was a familiar juxtaposition—the ideas at my dinner table in conflict with the dogmas I encountered elsewhere in my conservative Missourian community. This dissonance

fostered my curiosity about issues of policy and politics. I wanted to figure out why the adults in my life couldn't seem to agree.

Earlier in 2004, Barack Obama's now famous DNC keynote had inspired me to turn my interests into actions. Even at age twelve, I was moved by his ideas and motivated to work in public service. When Obama ran for president four years later, I heeded his call to get involved. I gave money I had made mowing lawns to my parents to donate to his campaign and taped Obama-Biden yard signs to my old Corolla, which earned it an egging and a run-in with silly string in my high school parking lot.

While I knew in high school that I wanted to involve myself in public service, I wasn't sure what shape that involvement would take until signs of the financial crisis—deserted strip malls and foreclosed homes—cropped up in my hometown. I was amazed by the disaster and shaken by the toll it took on my community. As I saw it, the crisis wasn't about Wall Street, but about people losing their jobs, homes, and savings. I didn't understand what Lehman Brothers had to do with the fact that my neighbor's appliance store had to lay off most of its employees.

Intent on understanding what had happened, I started reading up, inhaling books about financial crises and articles on mortgage-backed securities and rating agencies. Along the way, I also developed an affinity for the policymakers fighting the crisis. I admired how time and again these unknown bureaucrats struggled to choose the best among bad options, served as Congressional piñatas on Capitol Hill, and went back across the street to face the next disaster. I decided that I too wanted to work in financial regulation. I thought then and believe today that if I can help protect consumers and mitigate the downturns that force people from their jobs and homes, I will have done something worthwhile.

Strange though it may seem, this decision led me to join Barclays as an investment

berore. I was initially worried that I would discover financial rules and regulations to be impotent platitudes, without the power to change the financial system, but my experience taught me the opposite. New

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regulations catalyzed many of the transactions on which I worked, from bank capital raises to divestitures aimed at de-risking. Ironically, becoming a banker made me even more of an idealist about the power of policy.

I envisioned spending years in the industry before moving to a government role, and I left banking for private equity investing with that track in mind. When I began making get-out-the-vote calls on behalf of the Clinton presidential campaign, however, I realized that I needed to change my plans. I cared more about contacting voters, about the result of the election, and about its policy implications than anything I did at work. Although I'm grateful for what I've learned in the private sector, I don't want to spend more time on the sidelines of the policy debates and decisions that matter to me.

That's why I am pursuing a J.D. I want to help shape the policies that will make the financial system more resilient and equitable, and to do so effectively, I need to understand the foundation upon which the financial system is built: the law. The post-crisis regulatory landscape is already in need of recalibration; large banks still pose systemic risks, and regulation lags even further behind in the non-bank

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world. Advances in financial technology, from online lending platforms to blockchain technology, are raising new questions about everything from capital and liquidity to smart contracts and financial privacy. Policymakers need to confront these issues proactively and pursue legal and regulatory frameworks that foster public trust while encouraging innovation. A J.D. will give me the training I need to be involved in this process. I don't claim to have a revolutionary theory of financial crisis, but I do hope to be a part of preventing the next one.

### Essay 3: Populism

Growing up, I felt that I existed in two different worlds. At home, I was influenced by my large, conservative Arizonan family, who shaped my values and understanding of the world. During middle school, my family moved, and I enrolled in a small, left-leaning school with an intense focus on globalism and diversity. I enjoyed being surrounded by people who challenged my beliefs, and I prided myself on my ability to dwell comfortably in both spaces.

In 2015, American political reality disrupted the happy balance between my two worlds. The Republican presidential primary, in a gust of populism, was

proposing ideas that I didn't recognize and wouldn't condone, like a hardline immigration stance, opposition to free trade, and a tolerance for harassment. I resented this populist wave for hijacking the party, and the voters who created it. I didn't understand them, and I didn't think I could.

Despite my skepticism, I decided to make an attempt. As the founder of the Bowdoin College Political Union, a program that promotes substantive, inclusive conversations about policy and politics among students, I brought speakers with diverse ideologies to campus and hosted small group discussions with members of the College Democrats, the College Republicans, and students somewhere in between. In the winter of my senior year, I helped organize a summit that brought together students with a broad spectrum of views from dozens of universities throughout the eastern United States.

As a resident assistant during the 2016 presidential election, I held open-door discussions for individuals from across the political spectrum and around the globe. Facilitating these discussions felt like a natural extension of my role on campus, and I learned not only that having space for open dialogue can ease tensions, but

also that the absence of that space does not erase political difference. Instead, it creates feelings of isolation and fosters ignorance.

But it was the death of a family member in early 2016 that helped me understand another perspective, namely the populist views beginning to overwhelm the Republican Party. After the death of my mother's cousin from cancer, I called my second cousins, all three of whom are around my age, to offer my condolences. I was surprised to learn that none of them had finished high school. Instead, they had worked to help pay for their mother's treatment. While I had been worrying about which summer internships to apply for, they were worried about maintaining their family home. In the past, I'd thought that their views on economic policy and immigration came from a place of ignorance or spite. I realized over the course of our conversation that I had no idea what it was like to not have a high school degree and compete for employment in a rural area where wages are low. For the first time, I was engaging with people in the demographic that was generating the populist wave that was sweeping the country. This conversation led me to expand my studies in politics and to think beyond the left-right

spectrum to consider class and urban-rural divides within my own party.

Ultimately, reconnecting with my extended family informed my decision to write my senior thesis on populist movements and why economics drives them. It also changed the way I thought about politics and its effect on people like my second cousins.

After my college graduation, I took a job with a political and opposition research firm called XYZ in Washington, because I felt that my understanding of 2016's populism was still lacking. XYZ gave me the opportunity to work with people from different parts of the Republican Party: both establishment operatives and grassroots operations. This enabled me to work within the framework of Republican politics that resembles my own, while being exposed to the perspectives of people working to represent people like my second cousins. My time at XYZ helped me see the power of the populist movement, but also understand the limitations of its proposed solutions, like a resurgence of manufacturing. Now that I have interacted with populist groups, I see that ultimately, the valid frustrations of many working-class Americans need to be addressed by empathetic leadership and challenging but necessary evaluations of

policy in the areas of economics, education, and culture.

I want to apply my passion for political discourse in law school and in my career as a lawyer. My passion for engaging with others will serve me well in the classroom and in a career at the intersection of law and politics. I hope to continue to make connections between people of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints and to engage in meaningful, bipartisan discourse.

#### Essay 4: Pop Warner

One summer, when I was eight years old, I signed up to play Pop Warner Football for my hometown. After the calisthenics, scrimmages, and the rest of practice concluded in the midst of the sweltering early August sun, I would sprint thirty yards up a hill steep enough to go sledding down. I had to lose nine pounds in order to make weight for my junior pee-wee football team. I wanted nothing more than to be on the team, so it didn't faze me that I was the only one running up and down the hill. A dirt path marked the grassy knoll from my countless trips up and down. I usually managed to hold back the tears just long enough until I got home. As an eight-year-old, this was the most difficult challenge I had ever been

tasked with. But the next day, I would get down in a three-point stance and sprint up the hill under the red sky of the setting sun.

When I finally made the team, I was elated; I had achieved a goal I often felt impossible in those moments of sweat and tears. The excitement was, nonetheless, short-lived. The other kids still called me “Corey the Cupcake,” a nickname I thought I’d left behind with the extra pounds. In every game of the season, my first playing football, I received my eight minimum plays and rode the bench the rest of the game. It was an unusually wet September, and I caught a cold a few times from standing there for two and a half hours in the nippy morning rain. I hated it, but I kept playing.

I continued to play every fall through high school. My freshman year, during a varsity practice, I broke both the radius and ulna bones in my left arm and simultaneously dislocated my wrist, which required a plate and four screws to repair. To this day, I can’t help but flash back to that frigid November afternoon when I look at the five-inch scar on my left arm or when the breaking point is hit precisely. Sophomore year, I was introduced to a coach who frequently criticized me for “not being

black enough,” or sometimes, contradictorily, for acting “too black.” I was even benched for my entire junior year for being unable to attend football camp over the summer.

Why did I play football for eleven years? It might have been for the Friday nights in front of the school, as there was nothing more thrilling than making a crucial catch and hearing the whole town cheer. It might have been because I wanted to fit in with my athletic classmates. It might have been because I felt that I was improving after each catch, each hit, and each drill. But I believe, above all else, it was because I just don’t like to give up.

My first job as a project assistant at a large law firm was somewhat similar to my experiences as a young football player; both required grit and determination to push through difficult circumstances. Late one evening, two days before Thanksgiving, my supervisor asked me to complete and organize the service of eighteen subpoenas for the following day. The partners and associates were so busy with internal politics—one of the head partners was leaving the firm—that no one was available to walk me through the process. I felt ridiculous when I Googled “How to fill out and serve a subpoena,”



but it was important to me that I complete the project properly.

I am appreciative of the challenges that I faced as a project assistant. If it weren't for those experiences, it is unlikely that I would have been fortunate enough to be hired by the Delaware Office of the Attorney General, where I work today. My job here has confirmed that law is exactly what I want to do. I realized this through several opportunities to draft written discovery. I loved fashioning objections to each individual request in a given set. Developing legitimate grounds for disputing discovery on its merits and intent was inspiring to me. I can't wait to do this more and on a larger scale as an attorney.

The steadfastness that I obtained as a young athlete defines who I am. I couldn't see it at the time, but every day on which I gave something my best effort, whether it was on the practice field or in my tiny office on the twenty-seventh floor, I became a little bit stronger, a little bit wiser. I am confident that my perseverance and dedication will facilitate my future success, both in law school and afterwards.

Essay 5: Speech Therapy

When I was very young, I was diagnosed with a severe phonological disorder that hindered my ability to verbalize the most basic sounds that make up words. It didn't take my parents long to notice that as other children my age began speaking and communicating with each other, I remained quiet. When I did speak, my words were mostly incomprehensible and seemed to lack any repetition. I was taken to numerous speech therapists, many of whom believed that I would never be able to communicate effectively with others.

From the age of three until I was in seventh grade, I went to speech therapy twice a week. I also regularly practiced my speech outside of therapy, eventually improving to such an extent that I thought I was done with therapy forever. This, however, was short-lived. By tenth grade, I realized my impediment was back and was once again severely limiting my ability to articulate words. That was also the year my family moved from Vancouver, Canada to Little Rock, Arkansas, which complicated matters for me.

I knew that my speech was preventing me from making new friends and participating in classroom discussions, but I resisted going back into therapy. I thought that a renewal of speech therapy would be like

accepting defeat. It was a part of my life that had long passed. With college approaching, though, I was desperate not to continue stuttering words and slurring sentences. I knew that I would have to become more confident about my speech to make friends and to be the student I wanted to be. During the summer before my freshman year, I reluctantly decided to reenter speech therapy.

I see now that this decision was anything but an acceptance of defeat. In fact, *refusing* to reenter therapy would have been a defeat. With my new therapist, I made significant strides and the quality of my speech improved greatly. Using the confidence that I built in therapy that summer, I pushed myself to meet new people and join extracurricular organizations when I entered college. In particular, I applied to and was accepted into a competitive freshman service leadership organization called Forward.

The other members of Forward were incredibly outgoing, and many of them had been highly involved in their high school communities—two things I was not. I made a concerted effort to learn from those who were different from me. I was an active participant in discussions during meetings, utilizing my unique background

to provide a different perspective. My peers not only understood me, but also cared about what I had to say. I even began taking on leadership roles in the program, such as directing a community service project to help the elderly. My time in Forward made it clear to me that my speech disorder wouldn't be what held me back in college; as long as I made the effort, I could succeed. The confidence I gained led me to continue to push past the boundaries I had set for myself in high school, and has guided the bold approach I have taken to new challenges in college.

When I first finished therapy in seventh grade, I pretended that I had never had a speech disorder in the first place. Having recently finished therapy again, I can accept that my speech disorder has shaped the person I am today. In many ways, it has had a positive effect on me. My struggle to communicate, for example, has made me a better listener. My inability to ask questions has forced me to engage with problems on a deeper level, which has led me to develop a methodical approach to reasoning. I believe these skills will help me succeed in law school, and they are part of what motivates me to apply in the first place. Having struggled for so long to speak up for myself, I look forward to the day when I can speak up for

others.

## Essay 6: Ting Hua

“Ting hua!” I heard it when I scalded my fingers reaching above the kitchen counter to grab at a steaming slice of pork belly before it was served; I heard it when I hid little Twix bars underneath the bags of Chinese broccoli in the grocery store shopping cart; I heard it when I brought sticks back home to swing perilously close to the ceiling fan. Literally translated, “ting hua” means “hear my words.” Its true meaning, though, is closer to “listen to what I mean.” Although the phrase was nearly ubiquitous in my childhood, that distinction—between hearing and listening—did not become clear for me until much later in life.

That childhood began in Shanghai, where I was born, and continued in Southern California, where we moved shortly after I turned four. Some things stayed the same in the US. We still ate my mom’s chive dumplings at the dinner table. On New Year’s, I could still look forward to a red envelope with a few dollars’ worth of pocket money. But other things changed. I stopped learning Chinese, and my parents never became proficient in English. Slowly, so slowly I almost didn’t realize, it became harder and harder for me to communicate

with them.

Because I didn't feel like I could talk to them, I could never resist opening my mouth with others. I talked to good friends about Yu-Gi-Oh, to not-so-good friends about Pokemon, and to absolute strangers about PB&J, the Simpsons, and why golden retriever puppies were the best dogs ever. Even alone, I talked to my pet turtle Snorkel and tried out different war cries—you know, in case I woke up one morning as a mouse in Brian Jacques's *Redwall*.

The way I communicated with my parents didn't change until I came back for Thanksgiving my freshman year of college. I was writing for the school newspaper—a weekly column on politics. I had written an article in support of gay marriage. My parents had asked me about it, and in the way I was wont to do, I answered briefly before moving on to talk about my friends and my floor and my classes.


While I was brushing my teeth that night, my dad came into the restroom. He stood in the doorway and said, “Hey. I read the article you wrote about gay marriage... you should be careful saying things like that.”

His words—you should be careful saying things like *that*—sounded to me like

homophobia. I knew that in China, same-sex relationships were illegal, stigmatized, banned, so I thought I understood where my dad was coming from, even though I also thought it was bigotry. I was about to brush him off, to accept that we had different views, but when I looked up, I didn't see the judgment I was expecting. In the way he stood slightly hunched in the doorway, in the way he touched his chin, in the way his eyebrows drew together, I saw love. So I swallowed down "don't worry about it" and asked what he meant. He told me about a cousin of his, someone I would have called Uncle, who was expelled from his school and sent to the countryside for his political comments. In that moment, I realized that my dad wasn't concerned about my politics—he was concerned about me. Had I not stopped to *listen*, rather than just to hear, I would not have understood that. I would not have known why he told me to be careful.

Although I still enjoy talking to other people about PB&J sandwiches, I have learned to listen, to actively engage with my parents when we communicate. More importantly, whether I'm interviewing witnesses on the stand in mock trial, resolving disagreements between friends, or sitting in a chair while teachers and professors give me advice, I've made an

effort to remember those words my mom has spoken since I was a toddler: “ting hua.”

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