

PRE-LAW



APPLYING TO LAW SCHOOL: THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

Almost every law school requires a personal statement from each applicant as part of the application. From the perspective of the law school admissions officers who read and assess applications, the personal statement serves several purposes:

- Above all: law school admissions deans strongly emphasize that they want to know you as a person: your motivations, your life experiences, the reasons these make you a good prospect to be a lawyer. The statement is not an afterthought: law schools emphasize that their evaluation of applicants is holistic. Contrary to many people's perceptions, they do not just look at GPA and LSAT scores (though it is important to research the GPA and LSAT profiles of accepted applicants for the law schools you will apply to: this is easy via LSAC, and consult the pre-law advisor if you'd like advice for how to access this information.) And be aware that many law schools have merit-based scholarships that are solely determined by GPA and LSAT scores.
- Not all law schools include interviews as part of the application process (though some may request interviews only after you've made it past preliminary stages of assessment), so this is your principal opportunity to introduce yourself.
- This is a writing exercise and a writing sample, and ability to write well is a fundamental skill that law schools look for.

Not all law schools give prompts to guide you in choosing how to focus your statement. (But if one does, pay very close attention to it! The application portal at LSAC does allow you to upload multiple versions of your personal statement and direct different versions to different law schools you're applying to; consider that if you want to tailor your statement to individual schools' prompts). Most will give you a length limit (in words or pages: if the one you are applying to doesn't, aim for two pages). Some may give very precise instructions about formatting (type size and margins for example): be extremely careful to follow those, even if it means creating differently-formatted text files for different applications. Beyond that, here are the key points and dos/don'ts and best practices that advisors (and law schools themselves) recommend.

- Above all: brainstorm seriously about the focus you want to take. The statement is NOT supposed to be a reiteration of your résumé. It is about you as a person: what makes you distinctive among law school applicants? Typical focuses include: a life-changing event that has left such an impression that it informs the kind of person (and potential lawyer) you are; a challenge (or even a mistake!) you met and overcame, and how that displays your character and abilities; a leadership position or an internship or job you've had, or an organization you were part of, that helped you develop qualities you want the reader to know about.
- Although this will sound like the ultimate cliché, think very hard about crafting a compelling, personalized, and (probably) narrative-styled opening that catches the readers' attention: an anecdote, or

an insight you gained, that you can use as the springboard to the rest of your statement. This does not mean that you should not cast the statement in mature, polished prose – of course you should! – but a drily analytical opening is usually not the best way to introduce yourself to this audience.

- Keep the focus on you: though you might feel inclined to spotlight a mentor who had a great impact on you, resist the impulse and write about yourself. And be specific: a situation, an experience, with details to illustrate, will impress the reader much more than generic sentences like “I am very detail-oriented/responsible/mature” etc. Choose the experiences you want to relate and let THEM express the “I am very...” without saying the latter.
- Avoid cosmic or flowery language, overly academic language, and especially pseudo-legalese. It’s wonderful if your ambition is to “save the world” or “fight injustice” but if that’s what you want to express, then find a measured way of saying so that flows from the autobiographical setup you’ve established at the beginning. Remember that your readers are law school faculty or administrators: don’t try to impress them by using terms or concepts that they know a lot better than you do. And though this may be tough to acknowledge, expressing controversial positions on political or social issues may have an unpredictable impact on the readers.
- Spend some time looking over the law school’s website: especially its mission statement, its recent news feeds, and program descriptions. Then you can fit into your statement a reflection of why you are a good fit for that school. (There are resources available to you for looking at profiles of individual laws schools to help you with this, particularly the ABA Standard 509 Information Reports and profile sheets – consult the pre-law advisor for help in identifying this.) This shows that you’ve been attentive and thoughtful in your discernment. But don’t go overboard and make this a major part of the statement.
- Read, re-read, read again, and proofread. Careless mistakes in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and so on will not be your friends in this process. Ask your roommate or a friend whose writing ability you respect to read your drafts; ask the pre-law advisor to do that as well. The Writing Center has a dedicated staff member assigned to help students with law school statements (consult with the pre-law advisor for a referral): take advantage of this!