

Personal Statements

I. What is the purpose of the personal statement?

The goal of the personal statement is for the law schools to gather information about you outside of what is available from looking at your academic record, LSAT score, jobs, extracurriculars, and other items from your resume. It is a short piece of writing that should provide insight into the type of person you are, the type of thinker you are, the type of student you will be in the classroom.

The most important consideration in your personal statement, no matter what the topic, is the impression of yourself that you are creating.

The personal statement is your opportunity to distinguish yourself from all the other people with your GPA and LSAT score.

II. Before You Begin:

- Come to a Law Statement Writing Workshop!
- Brainstorm
- Free-write
- List your personal skills or qualities and consider how they will make you a good addition to your law school class
- Decide what is important for you to get across about yourself
- Have a friend do a mock interview with you regarding why you are interested in applying to law school and other questions about yourself—it can really help to talk out loud about these issues

III. Writing Process

This piece of writing should be much more like a story than a paper for college. It can be personal but not confessional or overly graphic. You should be mostly serious in it, but not take yourself too seriously. And it should focus on positive things about you. (If you want to explain a dip in your grades, or a medical leave from school, etc., that should be done in a short addendum to your application. The personal statement should present your good side and focus on positive things.) This does not mean that difficult topics are “off limits” for your statement or that you should avoid writing about something that challenged you—it just means that you should let the focus be your response to what happened, how it made you a stronger person, a more determined or committed student, etc.

- **Don't try to cover too many topics.** Two pages is just too little space to take on much.
- **Don't write a resume-in-prose.** This is a common mistake. Don't restate your resume in prose. This information can be found in other parts of your application.
- **Write as clearly and directly as possible.** Your statement is not a place to make your reader work hard to figure out what you're saying.
- **Give yourself plenty of time to write.** Plan to get feedback and put it through several drafts. Don't leave it until the last minute and try to write it overnight. Unlike a paper which your professor has to read, you will lose your audience on these statement.
- **Don't wait until you feel “almost done” to get other opinions.** At that point a major rewrite may seem too hard to do even though it's very necessary.
- **Remember: you're applying to be law student not a lawyer.** These are different things so you should think about that difference when you're writing your statement.
- **Give yourself some distance.** During the process put your writing away for a day or two and then come back to look at it with fresh eyes.

- **Be specific.** Broad sweeping statements will not make you stand out as an individual. Illustrate your points with personal examples or experiences.
- **Have a strong opening paragraph.** Your first paragraph should grab the reader's attention.
- **Avoid clichés, platitudes, quotes.** This statement is about you and should not borrow from other's words. It should also not be generic or vague.
- **Avoid writing about childhood/high school experiences.** You want to be a mature applicant with adult motivations for attending law school.
- **Don't focus too much on another person, even if they have been influential in your life.** Remember this statement is about YOU!
- **Avoid controversial issues.** You don't know your audience. It's okay to have opinions but you don't want to offend or alienate. Overall, it's most important to come across as open-minded and engaged with the world.
- **Be honest.**
- **Find a balance between being creative and cautious.** This can be tricky. There is a fine line between creative and interesting and odd and gimmicky. Don't write your personal statement as a legal brief or as a poem.
- **Be careful with humor.** It *can* work—especially if the humor shows some humility on your part BUT make sure you get feedback to see if it comes across well. In other words, do not try to be funny without assistance!
- **Be concise.** This is greatly appreciated by those who are reading thousands of applications.
- **Read the statement aloud.** It may feel funny to be talking to yourself but there's no substitute for HEARING your words to know if everything sounds right.
- **Don't waste space with a title or epigraph.**

IV. Questions to Ask during Revision

- A. Is your introductory paragraph interesting? How so?
- B. Is the direction of your essay clear from the first paragraph?
- C. Do you establish a clear theme that will guide how the essay develops? What is it and why is it appropriate?
- D. Do you establish a relationship with your audience that will compel them to become interested in what you have to say?
- E. Does your statement have continuity and focus and a successful organizational structure? How can you tell?
- F. Is your conclusion interesting? How so? Does it pull things together? Does it make sense with where your essay started? Why is it important?

FORMAT: 2 pages, double spaced, 1" margins all around, 11/12 point font.

Joyce P. Curll
Assistant Dean for Admissions and Financial Aid
Harvard Law School

I look for a well-written statement that conveys coherent thoughts and ideas and that helps me know the applicant better. I hope it will be interesting and that after reading it I will have a better sense of who the person is and what kind of student that person will be when he or she joins the class. The more a statement conveys how a person thinks, what he or she thinks is important, or other such insights, the better. You should think of the statement as an opportunity to round out pieces to the puzzle that makes up your application. Write about issues or problems you think about and how you have dealt with them. The more personal you can be – the more you can bring in your own background or history – the more valuable the statement can be.

Peel away the preconceived notions about what you think is expected, then think about what you want to convey to the committee and how that ties in with everything else in your application. Think about leaving the committee with an impression of you. Be comfortable with whatever you write.

In some of the most successful statements, applicants have reflected on who they are, what they're all about, and why they have done what they have done, and have left the committee with one or two thoughts about them.

Edward Tom
Director of Admissions
UC Berkeley School of Law

We don't have a standard form; we leave it pretty open-ended. We do warn applicants that our job is to choose law students, not lawyers, so to that extent we're interested in their academic potential, not exactly why they want to go to law school or what they want to do with their law degree upon graduation (because people often change their minds). In some cases, applicants have some burning interest or a significant event in their lives that compels them to go to law school for a specific reason, or else they have volunteered or worked actively in some area that interest them very much. And in those cases, of course, they should talk about why they want to get into environmental law or why they want to do public interest. So there are always exceptions, but, in the main, people who don't have that experience or unique interest ought to be talking about how they are different from everybody else.

Applicants should outline what they want to say in the personal statement and write clear, concise sentences, keeping in mind who their audience is and what our purpose is. I would stay away from trying to be cute. There's no really good substitute for a cogent sentence. Humor, unless it's done really well, often falls flat on its face.

Faye Deal
Director of Admissions
Stanford Law School

There are a variety of things an applicant can write about; it does not have to be about why he or she wants to go to law school. I tell applicants who are in the process of writing that this is their one opportunity to tell the admissions committee why they're different from every other

applicant in the pool, what makes them special and how they can stand out from the 4,000 other applicants we look at every year.

What I want to come away with is something new about the applicant that I haven't picked up from anywhere else in the file.

If someone is an older applicant who has been out working in a particular field and now is making the jump over to law school, that person should anticipate that one of the questions that's going to come up when we review the file is "Why is this person changing careers?" so that person may want to focus their personal statement on that. An applicant who was clearly premed the first couple of years of college and then changed to poli sci might want to tell us why; otherwise, that's an unanswered question we have.

Some applicants mistakenly think that in all cases what we want to know is why they want to go to law school, and that's not necessarily true.

Keep in mind that part of the exercise is to say what you want to say and to do so in about two pages. Two pages should be enough to get your point across.

Dennis Shields
Assistant Dean and Director of Admissions
University of Michigan Law School (Now at Duke Law)

The essay should follow the directions in the application; if it asks for one page or 250 words, the applicant should try to stay within those boundaries....Whoever sits down to read the applicant's file has probably, if they're lucky, half an hour to do it. So the candidate needs to make judgments about what's most important....Also, they ought to be themselves; they ought not to try to sway the reader by their apparent vocabulary and multi-syllable words. They're much better off being direct and succinct.

Each essay ought to fit the parameters of what a particular school asks for. It is easy for me to pick up a file and know that Yale got the same essay that we did. You don't want to create a new one for each school from whole cloth but each essay should be a little more different than which law school it mentions by name.

Quotes from:

Stelzer, Richard. *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School*. Princeton, NJ: Peterson's Guides, 1997.