

# Law School Personal Statements

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There is no other component of your application that you can control as much as your law school personal statement. An excellent personal statement will separate you from the sea of candidates with similar academic qualifications. Similar to an interview, a law school personal statement should introduce the attributes and accomplishments that make you an individual. Do not write a summary of your resume or transcript, but instead utilize this opportunity to expand upon what is unique about you, your life experiences, and your goals. The following advice is intended to help you understand your audience, teach you how to craft a persuasive statement, suggest topics, and tell you the inside secrets you should know.

## 1. Motivate Yourself!

- ✓ Ask yourself if you want to go to law school. If the answer is, “I want this!” then find a way to say it in a heartfelt, mature, determined, engaging way in your personal statement.
- ✓ Start writing now. Your personal statement is essential to gaining admission. Get serious!
- ✓ You must demonstrate a strong, mature commitment to law: Educate yourself about your chosen profession and the schools you would consider attending. This research will take some time, and your serious competitors will put in this time.
- ✓ The top law schools seem to ask very little of you in your application for potentially very high returns. This is somewhat deceptive because many of the people you are competing against will invest enormous amounts of time and energy in crafting and honing their two- or three-page personal statements. They may even hire a professional editor, through a company such as [EssayEdge](#). Invest time in your personal statement. This is not the two-page essay you whipped off in college the night before and got an “A.” This is a difficult genre that requires several drafts.
- ✓ When you begin writing, find a self-confident and mature tone, but don’t be afraid to let your personality and enthusiasm come through. Accept responsibilities for yourself, your family, and your community. Show why you are among the best and brightest, and break stereotypes by being unique.

## 2. Write for Your Audience

- ✓ Admissions committees at top law schools usually consist of professional admissions officers, professors, and students. These are the people who will read your personal statement.
- ✓ Your audience wants to enter into your thoughts and perspective, and they want specific details about you.
- ✓ The ideal effect you want to achieve is personal transformation for the reader. The very best personal statements are the unforgettable handful that move the reader.

## 3. Anticipate the Committee’s Cross-Examination

Because very few law schools offer interviews, the personal statement functions in an introductory capacity. Thus a good personal statement should implicitly address the questions the committee will ask themselves about you if they had an opportunity. A well-

crafted personal statement will not answer the following questions directly, but it will embed the desired answers in the narrative:

- ✓ Will you be a good lawyer?
- ✓ What was your tangible impact on an institution, an organization, or individuals?
- ✓ Have you reached beyond the safety net of college into the real world?
- ✓ Do you have a plan for your goals, or are you a dreamer?
- ✓ Can you put yourself in another subject position in order to see all sides of an issue?
- ✓ What will you bring to our law school?
- ✓ Have you been a pro-active starter in the past? Did you raise money for what you started?
- ✓ Do you know how to organize? Do you follow through on what you began?
- ✓ Have you demonstrated your ability both to work with a team and to delegate?

#### 4. The First Steps to an Exceptional Personal Statement

**Argumentation and Persuasion** – You have three purposes in your personal statement that demand the art of persuasion:

1. To make your reader believe you should be admitted.
2. To clear away any doubts your reader might have about you.
3. To make your reader act on your behalf.

You are writing a persuasive essay, but it should also have some of the elements of a persuasive speech. That is why it is generally called a personal “statement,” instead of personal essay. The personal statement is a unique genre and very difficult to master, since at most people write one or two in their lives. Most importantly for this genre, you want to build a strong ethos. That means your audience should like you and find you authoritative, competent, thoughtful, and honest. You want to demonstrate that you are a perceptive leader, who can communicate well with others, that you are open to new experiences and are enthusiastic. You do not want to come across as too formal, stuffy or too technical. You must give your audience evidence for your assertion that you should be admitted. The best essays will interpret the evidence provided by explaining how each piece of evidence contributes to supporting the assertion. The best essays will also be clear, concise, and graceful.

There are several types of evidence you may choose to use. Good personal statements use more than one type of evidence, and exceptional personal statements use them all.

- ✓ **Logos:** Reason and logic, including facts, figures, expert testimony, and syllogism. Use logos to persuade with facts.
- ✓ **Pathos:** Emotional appeals, including examples and narratives that build sympathy. Use pathos to persuade with feelings. Show you care passionately about something. Caution: Using too much pathos, including wretched descriptions, fear or guilt, or even too many glowing adjectives can make your audience feel manipulated, offended, or turned off.
- ✓ **Ethos:** Credibility, including perceived competence, character, and likeability. Use ethos to persuade by authority.

- ✓ **Mythos:** Belief and value patterns of an audience, including traditional narratives, sayings, metaphors, and symbols. Use mythos to add power, subtle rhetorical control and wider significance to your argument.

A persuasive personal statement will be an organic whole from beginning to end, not a collection of elements held together with a few flimsy pieces of tape you call “Why I should be admitted.” An exceptional law school personal statement will have themes running throughout like a functioning circulatory system, with these themes discussed and interpreted in the introduction and conclusion.

**Structuring Your Statement** – You should be able to tell someone how your personal statement is structured, what the logical progression is, what each of the roughly six to ten paragraphs is about, and how each paragraph both interprets evidence for its specific claim and contributes to the overall effect of the essay. You should also try to have a unifying theme. This might organically develop from your attention-grabbing material at the beginning of the statement. For most people, this will be a story with a moral strong enough to be your motto: the “angle” from which you are presenting yourself.

There are several standard structures for law school personal statements. You may use more than one:

- Tell a personal narrative or story. People remember stories. Have a clear ending to your story/stories as well as an explicit lesson. This type of essay typically allows you to demonstrate aspects of your character and leadership skills.
- Show how you have made chronological growth, including steps you will take in the future. It is generally better to avoid giving long narratives about some aspect of yourself before college. If you have a good reason for mentioning your childhood or adolescence (such as an unusual history abroad or a specific obstacle you have overcome), then it is better to keep it to one short, vivid paragraph and refer to it again later in the essay, if you are making it the unifying theme of your statement. This structure relies on time to move it forward, but that is not enough: it also requires a theme you are tracing through time.
- Present a problem and how you solved it or would solve it. This is called the problem-solution structure. For example, you might discuss what’s lacking in the legal system or society or demonstrate a need for change and then give evidence for how you have begun to solve this problem. This type of essay showcases your analytic reasoning.
- Use a metaphor or analogy to help your audience understand you. This demonstrates your rhetorical control and usually integrates mythos into your statement.
- Pose rhetorical questions to your audience or use suspense. This structure showcases your skill in persuasion and argumentation.
- Describe what you have learned from another lawyer or mentor. Also analyze what you would do differently. This type of essay allows you to showcase your analytic reasoning.
- Begin with a meaningful quote, which you explain and refer to throughout your statement. This is a difficult structure to master, but when it is done well, it can be satisfying for the reader. Do not randomly pick a quote from Bartlett’s. Do not pick

a quote by some famous person whose work you have never read or barely encountered. Spend some time unpacking the various levels and resonances of the quote in relation to your life and goals.

- List reasons you should be admitted. This structure, like the chronological structure, needs a unifying theme, or it is completely boring. It is best to avoid this structure.

### How to Write a Strong Introduction

- ✓ **Attention-grabbing material:** Hook them with a remarkable or a life-changing experience, an anecdote, or a question that will be answered by your law school personal statement.
- ✓ **Benefits:** Make your essay worth their time to read.
- ✓ **Credentials:** Build ethos.
- ✓ **Direction:** Tell them your thesis and structure.

### How to Write a Strong Conclusion

- ✓ Discover something new for your audience that you set up along the way.
- ✓ The conclusion is the final chord of music resolved. It should pull together the different parts of the personal statement, rephrase main ideas, interpret the importance of the choice of topics, point towards the future, and give the cue for ending with a rhetorical flourish.

### Appeal to your Audience

- ✓ Using pathos will appeal to your audience's feelings and emotions and make them more sympathetic to you. Several ways to use pathos include: writing your story as a quest narrative (which also adds mythos), asking the audience to think of a time when..., using rhetorical questions, using suspense, describing a great disappointment with details but ending with a positive lesson learned, describing a great joy.
- ✓ Your audience will be one of three types of learners: visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. Try to appeal to all of these by working in visual descriptions for visual learners, discussing times in which you excelled in oral communication for auditory learners, and discussing specific ways in which you were active for kinesthetic learners (kinesthetic learners are those who learn by physically doing rather than reading or listening). Your audience will primarily self-select as visual learners, because these typically include people who are good at reading. The bottom line is this: Vivid, active language is crucial.
- ✓ Try to make the reader feel he or she has taken a short mental vacation. Whisk the reader away into your world. Make the reader smile.
- ✓ If you think the audience can't relate to a specific piece of evidence you have given to back up your claim that you should be admitted, try to describe it so that the audience can feel connected imaginatively. This applies to describing your work in a different nation and culture, for example.

- ✓ Your audience will perk up if you describe a campus visit you made and give specific details about which of their colleagues you met with and how that visit changed your perspective.
- ✓ Appeal to universal human values, including success, freedom, honesty, and friendship, among others.

## 5. Topics for Law School Personal Statements

Your topic is related to, but separate from your structure. Your structure is the form of your personal statement, and the topic is the content. You may start with the structure or the topic, depending on which appeals to you more. Personalize your law school personal statement as much as possible by including concrete examples of your characteristics and specific details of your experiences. Show, rather than tell, the reader about yourself and your accomplishments.

- ✓ Write about an event or issue of particular importance in your life.
- ✓ Write what is unique about you or what interests and excites you.
- ✓ Write about coursework, experiences, or research related to your law career or legal interest, such as completing a thesis, working with a professor, or volunteering for a legal aid or clinic.
- ✓ Write about why a particular law school or program fits your goals. Extensive knowledge about that law school or program is essential for this to truly succeed.
- ✓ Write about overcoming any difficulties or adversity in your life. This may include difficulties faced in your personal life, academic life, or in your local or college community. Be sure that you explain how this contributed to developing qualities that will make you a good candidate for law school.
- ✓ Examine a tragedy in your life (loss of a parent or someone close, a severe accident) or a triumph (recognition for your outstanding performance, overcoming a disease, awards for excellence). Discuss how you have grown from this experience, and again, be sure that you explain how this contributed to developing qualities that will make you a good candidate for law school.
- ✓ Write about the most important course, professor, or event that happened to you in college.
- ✓ Write about your passions, ideals, or favorite hobbies and how they are related to your choice to attend law school and become a lawyer.

If you are still unsure about what you should write or where to begin your personal statement, try some of the following activities. Expand one or more into a theme for your law school personal statement.

- List your personal skills and consider how they will make you an asset to the law school or legal community.
- Have a friend or colleague do a mock interview with you regarding why you are interested in applying to law school. Your answers to their questions may trigger new ideas.

- Review all the pivotal or remarkable experiences that you have had throughout your life. Examine how these experiences have directed your life or your decision to apply to law school.
- Have you ever volunteered or served a cause of great importance to you? Write about that experience.
- How has a mentor, experience, a particular book, or quote changed the direction of your life? Write about that life-changing event.
- Have you assumed a leadership role in any arena, such as a club, sports team, or work? Write about what goals or ideals led you to seek these leadership roles, or what you learned and accomplished as a leader.
- Write several adjectives that characterize you, and then write a short paragraph explaining how these words describe you.

## 6. Things to Remember Once You Begin:

- ✓ Write about aspects of yourself readers can't get from the other parts of your application.
- ✓ Personalize as much as possible with specific, meaningful stories and experiences.
- ✓ Talk about yourself but also discuss how you influence others.
- ✓ Be creative. Use metaphors and analogies. These make extra neurons fire as the mind plays with the levels of resonance.
- ✓ If you are fluent in another language, mention it. This is a strong card. Play it.
- ✓ Discuss topics that build your credibility. Your reason for applying should not be that you have wanted to be a lawyer since you were five. What kind of credibility does a five-year-old have?
- ✓ Try to show you have as many of the following qualities as possible: Intellectual ability, analytic ability, imagination, motivation, maturity, organization, teamwork, leadership, self-confidence, oral communication skills, written communication skills, and career potential.
- ✓ Don't depress your audience. Everyone loves a happy ending.

## 7. Inside Secrets You Should Know:

- ✓ The law school professors will be reading your personal statement closely and will immediately be able to spot good writers with polished ideas, elegant structure, and no errors.
- ✓ Admissions committees have read hundreds of personal statements. They can spot a good one in about two seconds.
- ✓ Use recent stories before older, personal experiences over academic, strongest arguments before weaker. End strong!
- ✓ A strong introduction and conclusion are essential.
- ✓ People can think faster than they can read, so they are able to think about other things when they read your personal statement. Ideally, your essay will grab their attention so that they focus solely on you.
- ✓ Lawyers write professionally. You must demonstrate exceptional writing skills.

- ✓ Lawyers are master orators. They must know the skills of persuasion. Your essay must be able to persuade your audience to admit you. Use your rhetorical choices to show you have considered the art form.
- ✓ Community service is imperative for advantaged applicants and those interested in public service.
- ✓ The admissions committee is looking for those who have had “cross-cultural” experience: those who have put themselves in another environment that is out of their comfort zone and excelled, enjoyed it, learned about another culture, and learned to fit in.
- ✓ What you’ve done needs to be impressive and have impacted many people.
- ✓ The admissions committee is looking for future leaders in the public and private sectors, and those who value social power. They are not looking for naïve idealists.
- ✓ If the school were a store, you should go in knowing what you want, why you want it, and that you’re getting the best deal for your time and money. It is rare for an applicant to have taken the time to research the school, the program, and what he or she wants from it and why he or she wants that one experience. Present yourself strongly. Know what you want. Be clear about it, and simple, but smart.
- ✓ Admissions committees are impressed when you can mention one of their school’s individual strengths and how that would benefit you. Showing that you would take advantage of the school’s strengths as a means to achieve your end shows the committee you are motivated.

## 8. To Do’s:

- Use first-person “I.”
- Read through thirty personal statement samples. You will quickly see how they all start to sound the same. Now imagine your audience reading through thousands of law school personal statements. Try to find a way to make your writing style and content stand out from the crowd.
- Have a clear idea of what you want to convey before writing. Before starting your law school personal statement, use an outline to determine the structure of your statement. Have a central theme or thesis that is used throughout your personal statement. Note that you can brainstorm and free write to generate topics for your personal statement, but before you begin writing anything close to your final draft you should have a clear and concise idea of what you are conveying in your personal statement.
- Show continuity. Conclude your personal statement by referring back to the introductory paragraph and restate your main thesis in a slightly different way.
- Use your law school personal statement as a means to market yourself. Most top law schools receive thousands of applications. Admissions committees seek to weave together a class composed of unique individuals whose diverse views symbiotically complement each other. Consequently, admissions decisions are based upon subjective determinations, such as the personal statement, in addition to objective measurements such as one’s GPA and LSAT score. Use this opportunity to show the admissions committee that you are more than a standardized test score and a cluster of grades; showcase your dynamic and intriguing personality.

- Be “personal” in the law school personal statement. Cultivate a positive ethos. Be genuinely honest and try to focus on your most favorable characteristics. This will allow your personal statement to stand apart from the multitude of generic law school personal statements that merely reiterate a transcript or generally describe how law school will benefit the applicant’s life.
- Write clearly and to the point. Effectively utilize the limited words allowed to convey what is unique about yourself as well as why you are a suitable fit for law school or that particular program. Make sure every sentence is clear. If you aren’t sure what you said, no one else can guess.
- Adhere to the page or word limitations. Respect the pages limits! Most well-written personal statements should be no longer than two to three pages double-spaced. Length does not correlate with quality. Don’t make margins less than 1” around. Use 12-point font. If you absolutely must, you can use 11-point font in Times.
- Consider tailoring your personal statement to reflect the law schools to which you are applying. Making specific references to a particular law school or specialty will demonstrate your knowledge and commitment to a particular law school. Check if professors have retired or changed institutions.
- Take your statement through several drafts. Show your statement to professors and lawyers, and listen to their advice.
- Edit your law school personal statement. Proofread the final draft of your personal statement several times, including at least once orally, for substance, style, and grammatical and spelling errors. Have others edit your law school personal statement as well. Ideally, ask an academic advisor, professor, or someone familiar with the law school application process to edit your statement. Pay attention to detail. Two sentences joined by the conjunction “and” requires a comma before the “and.” Leaving out the comma is called a comma splice. A comma splice or two will send your file to the reject pile.
- Do use specific details. If it’s a dull generality, or says something like, “This experience was very valuable,” cut it. If you can exchange the name of the school for others, take out that sentence or rewrite it with a detail specific to the law school.
- Write about things that make you genuinely excited and enthusiastic. Readers of your statement can tell when your enthusiasm takes over. Be optimistic.

## 9. **Not To Dos:**

- Do not focus upon your weaknesses! Almost every applicant has some aspect of their application, such as a low LSAT score or GPA, which they view as a flaw. Discussing this weakness will only highlight it. Instead, write about the traits and characteristics that define you as an individual and showcase what you will bring to that law school. Your tone should be confident and positive. If you do have a weakness to address, such as a severe illness resulting in poor grades for a semester or a documented history of doing poorly on standardized tests with their not truly reflecting your potential, write about this in an addendum.
- Do not “write like a lawyer.” Lawyers are fond of “legalese,” or using long and often redundant words. The best law school personal statements display clear and succinct writing that is well within the specified word limitations.

- Do not solely discuss why you want to be a lawyer. The fact that you are going through the admissions process evidences your interest in the law. This topic is trite and will not leave a lasting impression upon the admissions committee. Instead, again, try to discuss what experiences led to your choice and what unique attributes you will bring to law school and the legal field.
- Avoid a boring introduction that loses the reader's attention. Admissions committees read thousands of law school personal statements, and a boring introduction will result in the reader skimming over rather than fully considering your personal statement.
- Do not use clichés, slang, or contractions. The tone of the essay should convey the seriousness of the topic and the writer. Don't be vague.
- Avoid controversial issues. Steer away from topics such as religion, political doctrines, or contentious issues. While you may be an outspoken critic of affirmative action or organized religion, the admissions committee may be offended by your views. Don't be inappropriate.
- Do not reiterate your academic accomplishments, unless they are not evident from your transcripts and test scores. As an example, a major family crisis or personal catharsis resulting in a drastic change in your grades is worth discussing, whereas your being on the Honor Roll most semesters is not. Furthermore, your grades are already documented on your transcript, and you should take this opportunity to give the committee information they cannot find in other parts of your application.
- Do not solely rely on the spell checker. It will not correct words that are improperly used such as "form" instead of "from" and "none" versus "one."
- Avoid using the passive voice. Extensive use of the passive voice will rob your personal statement of clarity, brevity and impact. Sentences written in the active voice are more powerful and succinct than those written in the passive voice. The passive voice occurs when the subject receives the action of the verb and is acted upon by someone or something. Generally, passive voice uses a verb form of "to be." An example of passive voice would be, "The fire is seen by Joe." When using the active voice, the subject performs the action of the verb: "Joe sees the fire." Trial lawyers may use passive voice as a rhetorical device to avoid attributing actions to a subject. However, the personal statement is not the place for passive voice.
- Do not write about a romance. This is an example of an inappropriate topic.
- Do not be too influenced by one person or idea. Show you can synthesize ideas and choose your own way.
- Do not sound arrogant. This will score you zero points for positive ethos.
- Do not use the words, "And at that moment I knew..."

## 10. Top 10 Personal Statement Mistakes

This list, culled from discussions with admissions directors, lists the ten biggest mistakes applicants often make on their law school personal statements. Most of these were discussed above.

1. Spelling and grammatical errors.

2. Sending a personal statement to school B meant for School A. Harvard Law School does not want to read about your desire to attend Yale Law School.
3. Merely summarizing your resume in essay form.
4. Staying too detached in your writing style and not letting your personality come through in your “personal” statement.
5. Focusing upon your weaknesses and not your strengths.
6. Using too many big words or “legalese.”
7. Spending just a few hours on your personal statement and submitting your first draft.
8. Exceeding the specified page or word limitations.
9. Stating that once admitted you will save the world.
10. Using gimmicks such as writing in crayon, modeling your personal statement as a legal brief, or writing it as a poem.

For more personal statement samples go to [EssayEdge](#).