

Health Professions and Prelaw Center
presentation:

Writing the Personal Statement for Law School

HPPLC is *the* place on campus for prelaw advising, help with recommendation letters, LSAT prep, deciding where to apply, calculating your chances for admission, and much more.

Disclaimer.....

- **This presentation contains some excellent information relevant to many applicants.**
- **It is not perfect, and individual situations can be quite different. There are valid exceptions to every suggestion presented here!**
- **Feel absolutely free to disregard ANY advice, as your version may indeed be wonderful—but do so *consciously and thoughtfully!***
- **This essay is YOURS and YOU must be happy with it!**
- **TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS!**

Read the PS material on the
HPPLC website *before* you
begin!

www.hpplc.indiana.edu/law

See especially “Guidelines...”

Two central criteria

1. Mechanics: your essay **MUST** be well-written!!!

Demonstrate mastery of writing skills, grammar, spelling, and usage.

NOTE: for a few officials even ONE TYPO is an automatic denial.

Why? You know this essay is crucial and you have had MONTHS to put it together. As an attorney, a simple filing error with the court may cause your case to be thrown out.

Most essays are completely error-free.

Most officials are more forgiving (*just don't count on it*).

2. Content:

Take time to write (and rewrite) a *thoughtful* statement with *reflections* on the personal experiences that have shaped you.

Personal Statement:

--Make it *Personal*

- So far they have only heard *from others* about you:
LSAT, GPA, LOR, transcripts.
- This is your **ONLY** chance to be heard *in your own words*.
- Along with the resume, it is the main vehicle for portraying your uniqueness through highlighting and reflecting on experiences *not contained elsewhere in the application*.

Basic parameters

- Many instructions simply say: “Tell us something about yourself that we can’t learn from the rest of the application.”

Some are quite specific. CHECK YOUR SCHOOLS IN ADVANCE!

- For most schools, you can write a **generic statement** and tweak it here and there if needed.
- If you do have specific reasons for applying to a given school, hopefully including academic ones, you should mention them.

[If doing so does not fit with the “flow” or length restrictions of your essay, do so in a separate “letter of addendum”.

- “To Whom It May Concern:
- “Subject: (some variation of →) “Why I Would Like to Attend Acme Law School...”]

Know thyself:

Most admission committees pay close attention to your ability to self-assess—to be able to reflect upon:

- your own experiences and your ability to draw conclusions from them concerning your goals, skills, and attributes;
- your ability to learn from your experiences;
- your dedication to learning from your mistakes;
- your willingness to challenge your own preconceptions;
- your ability to effectively assess your goals and your reasons for pursuing them;
- your ability to convey this information in a coherent, articulate, grammatical, and professional manner.

Sample prompts (in full, from 2011):

DePaul Chicago:

“A personal statement not exceeding two pages is required and must be electronically attached to your application.”

Georgetown:

“**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)”

American University:

“The Committee on Admissions requires applicants to submit a personal statement with the application. Your personal statement is the vehicle to tell us about yourself, **your background, your achievements, and other factors** you want us to consider in evaluating you for admission. This statement may be a maximum of 3 pages double-spaced and may be electronically attached.”

Akron:

“The personal statement may expand on your application or reveal a side of yourself not expressed on your application. It may include, but need not be limited to **1) how a law school education will further your personal and professional goals; 2) significant personal accomplishments; and 3) special circumstances**, if any, that you wish the admissions committee to know as it reviews your file.

“Avoid clichés, grammatical errors, typographical errors, and plagiarism. The personal statement should be typed, double-spaced, and should be no longer than two pages.

“If you have overcome special challenges such as **economic hardship, educational deprivation, physical disability, discrimination, assimilation to a different culture/society, or any other disadvantage**, please describe those challenges in **your personal statement.**”

Loyola University School of Law Chicago:

“Entering Students Personal Statements: Please submit a personal statement of no more than two typewritten pages. The essay should contain **information about you and why attending law school is important to your life goals**. There are no margin restrictions and font must be 10 or larger.

“The Faculty Committee on Admission is interested in knowing you as a person. You may, if you wish, submit an additional one page essay on one of the following topics:

- **Essay One: Why have you chosen to apply to Loyola University Chicago School of Law?**
- **Essay Two: What attributes or characteristics best describe you, and how will they contribute to your success as a law student and member of the legal profession?**

“The School of Law recognizes that the ability to overcome hardships or unusual circumstances, together with other factors, may indicate increased potential for success in the study of law. Applicants who wish to have **hardships or special circumstances** considered as a factor in the admission process should identify and explain the particular circumstances and provide an explanation of why it is a factor. This information may be included either as a part of your essay **or as a one-page addendum** to the essay.”

John Marshall Chicago:

- “PERSONAL STATEMENT (*Required of all applicants. Submit 2 to 4 pages, typed double-spaced.*) Please provide any additional information about **yourself or your experiences** which you feel may support your admission to law school, including why you wish to enter the legal profession.
- “The law school seeks a heterogeneous student body, taking into account in its admission process such factors as **ethnic and cultural background, sexual orientation, unusual economic disadvantage and geographic origin**. If any such factors are of special relevance to your application, list here or attach a **separate sheet** or electronic attachment.”

Boston College:

- “Please provide us with a personal statement that reflects on your capacity to pursue legal study and your desire to enter the legal profession. In crafting your essay, you may choose to address one of the following topics, to the extent you believe it reflects on your character and fitness to study the law:
- “a.) a major life experience that has colored your world view;
- b.) significant coursework undertaken in college, and/or professional experience which reflects on your ability to succeed as a law student;
- c.) unique personal characteristics or traits that you will bring to the BC Law community.”

- **IU Indianapolis:**

“Personal Statement: Electronically attach a personal statement of no more than two pages (no less than 10-point font, single spaced, 1 inch margins) that **tells us more about you and your reasons for seeking a legal education.** The statement must be composed and written by you. You may wish to elaborate on information you have already provided in this application or you may wish to discuss other matters that you believe would be helpful to the Committee on Admissions.

- **“Optional Statement:** In addition to your personal statement, you may submit brief supplemental statements that explain any **unique skills, experiences, hardships overcome, educational or socioeconomic disadvantages,** or any other aspects that have not already been addressed in your application. Please respond in one page or less.”

- IUB Maurer School of Law:

“Please write a brief statement that tells us about you. The best statement will highlight the **special strengths and experiences** that you would bring to our law school and the legal profession. These may include **leadership, responsibility, creativity, commitment to social justice, international and/or cross-cultural experience and significant work experience**, including care-giving.

“You may use this statement **or a brief addendum** to tell us how your presence would make the class more **diverse.**”

Summary of these prompts

- tell us more about you and your reasons for seeking a legal education.
- tell us **about you**
- highlight the special strengths and experiences that you would bring to our law school and the legal profession
- include leadership, responsibility, creativity, commitment to social justice, international and/or cross-cultural experience and significant work experience, including care-giving.
- Discuss how your presence would make the class more diverse.
- information about you and why attending law school is important to your life goals
- information about yourself or your experiences which you feel may support your admission to law school, including why you wish to enter the legal profession.
- any subject of importance that you feel will assist us in our decision
- tell us about yourself, your background, your achievements, and other factors you want us to consider in evaluating you for admission.
- 1) how a law school education will further your personal and professional goals;
2) significant personal accomplishments; and
3) special circumstances, if any, that you wish the admissions committee to know as it reviews your file

Summary of formatting:

1. [some give NO guidance whatever]
2. (Shortest) “double-spaced; no longer than two pages”
3. (Longest—i.e., **no length mentioned**):
“please double-space.”
4. “Maximum of 3 pages double-spaced”
5. “Not exceeding two pages” (**spacing not mentioned**)
6. “2 to 4 pages, double-spaced”
7. “No more than two pages. No margin restrictions and font must be 10 or larger.” (**spacing not mentioned**)
8. “No more than two pages (no less than 10-point font, **single spaced**, 1 inch margins)”

Some popular topics in BRIEF:

Think about your past and write down the **lessons** you've learned in life.

- Where did they come from?
 - Why do you still remember them?
 - How do they reveal who you are today?
-
- Why law school? Or, what are your personal/professional goals and how will a JD help you reach them?
 - (It's fine if you don't know what area of law you'd like to go into. That will take care of itself. But you should come across as making an *informed decision*.)
-
- A pivotal event, inspiring class/book/person. Or two. But keep the focus on YOU!

More sample topics

- Hardships overcome, struggles won (any character-building experiences).
- An event/encounter (or two, or three) that confirmed that a legal career/law school is right for you.
- An event/experience (or two, or three) that had a profound impact on you, your development, your values, etc. Does NOT have to be law-related!
- Note: do NOT dwell on descriptions of what happened or on setting the scene. Focus on your *evaluation* and *reflections* on the larger meaning of your experiences.

Prepare.... some ideas...

- Try taking notes on “your life” for a month.
 - Write down what’s important to you; and why.
 - Jot down any ideas about what motivates you.
 - What are your dreams, goals for today?
 - How do you feel about what’s happening to you?
 - Explain the choices you make.
- Put the above in an outline format--do not leave anything out.
 - Organize your notes: look for patterns, themes.
- Prioritize sections
- Write first drafts of each section—do NOT worry about length.
- Edit/discard

If you are stuck.....

Check out HPPLC's

“Personal Statement Warm-up Exercises”

- <http://hpplc.indiana.edu/law/law-pswu.shtml>

Suggestions:

- 1. Answer two questions a day for a week.**
- 2. Have a friend “interview” you.**

The Writing Process: Tips

- Grab their attention—many officials will read 20-30+ essays in one sitting. You need to wake them up. The first paragraph is very important.
- Have a beginning, middle, ending.
- Avoid “conclusory statements” (which do not provide any underlying facts to support the stated conclusion, such as “I am dedicated to any task I undertake...” or “I am hard-working”). Use concrete examples (vignettes) from real life, such that readers will come to the desired conclusion on their own.
- Include real evidence and examples from your life. Make sure the details of your story substantiate your claims.

More suggestions to consider:

- Prefer depth to breadth.
- If you deal with hardships or difficult issues, the overall tone should still be **positive and upbeat**. If at all possible, let them know that the hard times are behind you.
- Consider addendums to address deficiencies or blemishes.
See: <http://hpplc.indiana.edu/law/law-psguide.shtml>.
- Evaluate and reflect on the meaning of your experiences—do NOT simply describe them.

Still more:

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

- Most experts advise *against* the use of quotations, especially common ones, and especially when used as your title or first line (this common device is seen as a crutch).
- In other words, AVOID CLICHÉS.
- **But always feel free to disregard this** (and any other advice), as the result may indeed be wonderful....
—but do so *consciously and thoughtfully!*

Be yourself!

- Do NOT try to be the perfect applicant (they don't even want those people)!
- Do NOT try to mold your particular background into what you think they'd like to hear. (It won't work and will sound forced)
- Do NOT try to assert that practicing law is just like your sport, hobby, or other non-academic activity. It isn't.

Real-life (negative) examples:

- “Rock climbing has enhanced my critical thinking and analytical skills.”
 - “In many ways playing rugby is like being an attorney.”
- **Such analogies CAN work IF you provide concrete example(s) of how the trait you acquired from the activity **has in fact actually helped** you **academically** in college:

“the discipline and time-management I had to develop in order to play rugby served me well academically....(→ example...) *Make the connection explicit !*

Make sure the essay is about YOU!

- If you write about someone who inspired you...
 - The danger is that the essay will focus on the other person.
 - Be sure the majority of the statement deals with YOU and how YOU, YOUR goals, character, values, etc., were affected by the other person.
- If you have had a pivotal experience in your life, or have an interesting story to tell...
 - The danger is that the essay will focus on the logistical details of what happened, setting the scene, etc.
 - Be sure the majority of the statement deals with YOU and how YOU, YOUR goals, character, values, etc., were affected by the experience.

Reflect upon and evaluate your experiences...

Write naturally....

- Tell your story in your own voice. Do NOT change the way you express yourself. Speak naturally and comfortably.
- Avoid legalese! (This is a principle stressed in law school as well. Legalese is seen as a crutch.)
- Do NOT try to impress with your vocabulary. Forced language is not impressive—it is embarrassing. As they say, “big words do not denote big minds, just big egos.”

Dent relay on spell chock.

Law School's perspective:

- You have had months to put together this incredibly important assignment. **There is no excuse for mistakes.**
- Some officials will not tolerate *even a single error!*
- Many schools are overwhelmed with an excess number of qualified applicants. Some are looking for any quick reason to move on to the next file.

→ This is NOT mindless obsessiveness: If you make a careless mistake in filing your Brief with the Court of Appeals, your entire case may be thrown out and *you'll have to explain WHY to your client and to your firm's partners.* This is taken quite seriously.

Proof, proof, proof!!

- According to research at Cambridge University, it doesn't matter what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that the first and last letters are at the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without a problem. This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself, but the word as a whole.

Remember—it is almost impossible to write a great personal statement.

- Such documents must be rewritten. **And rewritten, and rewritten again. Expect to write at least 3 full drafts.**
- Budget 4-8 weeks *at least*.
- Plan on having to write 3-5 full drafts *at least*.
- Give yourself more time than you think you will need.
- Start early enough so that you can periodically put things aside for a few days and look at your work with fresh eyes.

Important:

- be willing to start completely over *from the beginning* if the final product is not working!
- [But do not delete old drafts. Save everything and label prior drafts carefully.]

Once again—very important:

- **This presentation contains some excellent information relevant to many applicants.**
- **It is not perfect, and individual situations can be quite different. There are valid exceptions to every suggestion presented here!**
- **Feel absolutely free to disregard ANY advice, as your version may indeed be wonderful—but do so *consciously and thoughtfully!***
- **This essay is YOURS and YOU must be happy with it!**
- **TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS!**

“Where do I go for help in preparing for law school?”

HPPLC

(That’s the Health Professions and Prelaw Center)

Maxwell Hall Room 010

--right across from the Union!—

The End