

HEALTH PROFESSIONS AND PRELAW CENTER

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LAW SCHOOL ADMISSION--QUESTIONS & ANSWERS FOR FRESHMEN AND SOPHOMORES

WHAT IS THE BEST PRELAW CURRICULUM/MAJOR?

If every law school could choose one message carved in stone in a prominent place on every college campus, it would read: "There is no such thing as a prelaw curriculum!" Coming in a close second would be "There is no preferred prelaw major!" The study and practice of law have been successfully undertaken by people who have majored in biology, business, engineering, history, music, French literature, pharmacology, physics, and art history, to mention just a few. If anything, having a relatively unusual major can actually be to your advantage. Law schools seek a diverse first-year class, and this includes diversity in coursework and in the major. In a typical year at IUB, students from over 50 majors apply successfully to law schools around the country. A liberal arts major allows you to develop strong writing skills, for example, while a science or math major promotes problem-solving.

Law schools are looking for both breadth and depth of study. Because an applicant's grade point average (GPA) is an important factor in law school admissions (second only to the LSAT score), you should select courses you enjoy and in which you believe you can do well. In addition, your chosen course of study should provide a viable career or graduate school alternative in the event you change your mind about attending law school, or want to work for a time before applying.

ARE THERE COURSES THAT CAN HELP ME GET IN OR PREPARE ME FOR LAW SCHOOL?

Even though law schools have no specific course requirements for admission, a number of areas merit special attention. Law schools look for evidence that you have developed skills which are among the most useful and necessary for law students and lawyers.

1. Writing Skills

Writing is an essential part of the lawyer's craft. A firm understanding of the rules of grammar, a clear writing style, and strong organizational skills are essential. Lawyers must express themselves clearly and concisely in written and oral communication. Very few lawyers spend their days arguing cases before a judge or jury.

Writing skills are equally important for law students because exams are almost always in essay form. Furthermore, these essay exams are given only once for each class, at the end of the semester, and generally account for 100 percent of the student's grade. Take courses that emphasize essay exams, research papers, and oral presentations. Attempt to seek out those professors who take the time to grade exams and papers critically.

2. Interpersonal Communication Skills

Although very few lawyers actually argue cases before a judge or jury, all lawyers advise, persuade, and negotiate with other individuals, from clients to colleagues to opposing counsel. Effective communication requires a well-developed ability to speak clearly and convincingly. Just as importantly, it requires a particularly strong ability to listen accurately. Such skills are also important in law school where many classes are interactive, and professors may consider the quality of class participation when evaluating students. Classes which require in-depth classroom discussion will help you develop the ability to articulate your ideas and to listen critically to what others are trying to communicate while formulating your own thoughts. Smaller classes and seminars tend to provide such interaction.

3. Analytical Skills

The practice and study of law require logical thought processes. The necessity of critical thinking in the actual practice of law should be obvious. Attorneys are constantly challenged to apply existing law to ever-changing factual circumstances and to challenge opposing arguments. Any practice you can get now in taking demanding, analytical exams will help you later in law school. In addition, the development of critical and analytical thinking skills will also help you on the LSAT exam. Courses in philosophy, mathematics, the natural sciences, logic, and economics, among others, provide excellent means for developing these skills.

4. Humanities and Social Sciences

A good lawyer understands the relationship between individuals and institutions. The law is not stagnant--it constantly evolves to meet the changing mores and needs of society. As a result, lawyers must understand the evolution of law and society and anticipate possible changes. Courses in history, political science, sociology, anthropology, and psychology can nurture this understanding.

5. Economics/Business

There is an obvious and very real overlap between business and law. If you wish to practice in a business-related area of law such as corporate law, income tax, or finance, an understanding of the basic concepts of economics and business is crucial. But even if your plans do not include any such practice, be warned that many law school courses do involve some element of economics. Many law students find a basic understanding of economics helpful, especially in courses stressing an economic approach to legal analysis. As a result, you should prepare yourself by taking at least an introductory economics course. Do not feel compelled to major or minor in economics or business, but do consider taking two or three such courses. The goal is to develop an understanding of the language of business and economics.

6. Diversity

Above all else, develop a broad base for your education. The study and practice of law deal with virtually every aspect of society. Your undergraduate studies should give you a suitable foundation for such an undertaking. You should always strive to expand your horizons and broaden your frame of reference. Try to take classes from excellent teachers -- in any discipline.

7. Undergraduate Law Courses

Many students believe they should take some of the undergraduate law courses to help them get into law school or to assist them while they are enrolled. Generally, these courses help with neither. Some of them are too vocational in nature. Others may mimic what you will encounter in law school, especially if taught by a lawyer, but the students in the course are not law students, and the type of classroom exchange is different from what you will experience in law school.

Law schools tend to look upon an over-abundance of undergraduate law courses as a waste of time unless you have a genuine interest in them. This is not because these courses lack value, but because you could have been taking other courses and attaining more breadth. Law schools, with some justification, believe that they are best suited to teach you the law.

8. Technical Courses

Those few students who have already selected an area of the law in which they will specialize, might want to prepare accordingly. For example, patent lawyers must possess a "hard science" or engineering degree, international lawyers will profit from language fluency and international business knowledge, and environmental lawyers will benefit from biology and chemistry courses. But, as stated in the beginning, students must select majors they like and that would not restrict them if law school ends up not being the final choice.

WHAT IS THE LSAT?

The LSAT is a standardized examination designed to determine your general aptitude for the study of law. You must take the LSAT to apply to law school. The test provides a score between 120 and 180 and a writing sample that you produce during the test. The average score is a 152. For reference, the median score for students who were admitted to Indiana University School of Law--Bloomington in 2008 was a 164. The exam does not measure knowledge; rather, it attempts to measure your ability to think analytically and critically, specifically the ability to read and comprehend complex texts, to manage and organize information and to process that information to reach conclusions. The LSAT seeks to determine how well you might respond to training in the law by measuring skills and abilities, including:

- critical and accurate reading;
- dispassionate, flexible, intelligent, and inferential thinking;
- stability under pressure;
- tolerance of ambiguity and of abstraction;
- quick adaptation to unfamiliar procedures and circumstances.

WHAT CAN I DO TO PREPARE FOR THE LSAT?

There are no specific courses in college that will prepare you for the questions on the LSAT; however, courses which develop analytical reasoning, logical reasoning and reading comprehension skills may help students approach the test with confidence. Many students find that a basic logic course is helpful. The key to preparation is to become familiar with the types of questions asked and to become proficient in answering the questions quickly. You can most effectively prepare by working with actual exams. The HPPLC office keeps all past exams on file at the Center, and you may borrow them without charge. In addition, LSAT practice books are published by private companies. We maintain copies of several excellent study guides. HPPLC offers a relatively low-cost LSAT Prep Workshop prior to each exam. To receive information about these courses, sign up for the prelaw email listserve by visiting the HPPLC website. Prewlaw Advisors can aid you in developing a preparation strategy that suits your needs.

WHEN SHOULD I TAKE THE LSAT?

The LSAT is offered four times each academic year in June, October (or late September), December and February. There are some decided advantages to taking the LSAT during the summer prior to the senior year. First, you will receive your scores early in the application process and can therefore begin the search for appropriate schools. With most schools using "rolling" admissions an early start is highly beneficial. Second, you will have time to repeat the LSAT in the fall of your senior year if necessary. Waiting until the February examination will automatically exclude you or hurt your chances for admission to many schools.

WHAT OTHER FACTORS ARE CONSIDERED FOR ADMISSION?

Law schools will consider anything that may bear on the prospective student's potential as a law student. For example, they will look at the difficulty of the applicant's major and courses. They will consider whether the student took honors courses and seminars, held a part-time job, had a history of doing poorly on standardized tests, or carried heavy or light academic loads. Thus, although they cannot substitute for good grades, letters of recommendation, the personal statement, and occasionally letters of addendum can be important factors.

Many law schools are interested in students with leadership abilities. Rather than merely participating in several groups or activities, become actively involved in one or two. Do not burden yourself with so many extracurricular activities that your academics suffer. Law schools look for students who can successfully balance the two areas, giving their education priority. Avoid overloading your schedule with pass/fail options and lower-level courses. Law schools judge applicants on the quality of their curriculum as well as on the grades received.

WILL I NEED RECOMMENDATIONS WHEN I APPLY TO LAW SCHOOL?

Yes. Most law schools require faculty recommendations as part of the applicant's file. The more perceptive, and therefore helpful, recommendation letters come from evaluators who know the student well. You cannot go through college anonymously. ***Find small classes where research papers and/or essay examinations are expected.*** Take classes in which discussion is encouraged. Study with a professor in more than one course. Go to office hours, even if you understand the class material. It is imperative for you to get to know some of your professors so they know you well enough to write a convincing letter of recommendation.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT LAW SCHOOL REQUIREMENTS AND PROGRAMS?

Visit, call, or email the ***Health Professions and Prelaw Center*** in Maxwell Hall 010, which is right across from the Union. We encourage you to make individual appointments with a prelaw advisor, or attend small group meetings. In addition, HPPLC hosts a fall gathering of law school representatives on the IU campus in Bloomington. Over 100 law schools send representatives to the Law Fair to talk to interested students. If you take full advantage of the resources offered at this event, you can obtain noteworthy information about many law schools.

You can also receive information about law schools by joining ***Phi Alpha Delta***, a national legal fraternity. The IU prelaw chapter provides students interested in law with information about the profession and about legal education. The fraternity members meet regularly and often invite speakers from law schools or the legal community to address issues of interest to the members.

WHEN SHOULD I APPLY TO LAW SCHOOLS?

You should consult each individual school's admission requirements as printed in the school's catalog. However, a good rule would be to begin the process about one year before you plan to enter law school. Applying before Thanksgiving is a good rule of thumb. See a prelaw advisor about the timing of your applications and check the HPPLC website early in your junior year.

ARE THERE SPECIAL PROGRAMS FOR MINORITY STUDENTS APPLYING TO LAW SCHOOL?

Yes. Law schools recognize the need to provide legal training to qualified minority students, in order to increase the number of minorities in the profession. For information concerning special programs for minority students (for example, I-CLEO), contact the Health Professions and Prelaw Center. The Center staff includes a Minority Prelaw Advisor ready to assist underrepresented students with their particular concerns.

WHAT ELSE CAN I DO TO HELP ME DECIDE IF LAW SCHOOL IS RIGHT FOR ME?

Being a lawyer means much more than a paycheck. Being a good lawyer requires the kind of dedication and emotional commitment for which money is inadequate compensation. Learn what being a lawyer means by talking to attorneys and law students. If possible, visit a law school to see what the study of law is like. On this campus, the IU Law School matches interested students with law students for a tour, including sitting in on a first-year class, and will do so whether or not you are specifically interested in attending IU Law. Ultimately, you will have to decide if law school and the legal profession are for you. You should make a point of learning all you can about the legal profession.

We encourage you to use email to ask questions, check your recommendations, and to communicate with our prelaw advisors. Send email to an individual prelaw advisor or to hpplc@indiana.edu. Please check the HPPLC website for notices of upcoming meetings, campus visits by admissions representatives, and other items of interest.

This document has been prepared for Indiana University - Bloomington students by the Health Professions and Prelaw Center. Please note that specific requirements and policies can change at any time without notice. Students are responsible for obtaining the most current information directly from the application services, schools, and programs in which they have an interest.