

# HEALTH PROFESSIONS AND PRELAW CENTER

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## Writing an Effective Personal Statement For Law School

The personal statement is often the part of the law school application that students most dread. It is certainly hard to write about yourself and to guess what the committees want to hear. Since most law schools do not use an interview process, this is your chance to show admission committees who you are and what you have done that makes you uniquely qualified to study and practice law. A single two-page essay is rarely strong enough to make up for an otherwise hopeless record, or weak enough to disqualify a genius, but if you're in the middle group--and most people are--a good essay can help tip the balance in your favor. Take full advantage of that opportunity!

### HOW THE PERSONAL STATEMENT IS USED

Nearly all law schools ask for a personal statement in addition to the routine background information provided on the rest of the application. The personal statement provides an opportunity for you to demonstrate your writing skills and to present information that the application itself did not highlight.

Law schools use the personal statement in two important ways: first and foremost, the personal statement is a sample of your writing. One of the main skills that every successful law student--and lawyer--needs is excellent writing ability. Use the personal statement to impress the admission committee with your clarity and your ability to organize your ideas well. However, avoid legalese and do NOT try to impress with overuse of a thesaurus. Keep it clear and concise. Second, the law schools use the statement to determine which students among all the well-qualified applicants are going to be more interesting, intelligent, committed, and involved in the law school. Therefore, use the statement as your chance to highlight interesting and unusual things about yourself, your activities, your background, or your motivations for pursuing law as a career. You must distinguish yourself from the mass of applicants who are in competition for your seat.

Do not feel that your personal statement is an unimportant part of your application. Although much of law school admission is based on your (GPA) LSAT score and grade point average, admission committees are looking for people with that extra spark that touches a chord with them--something that convinces them that a particular candidate has what it takes to be successful in their school and, ultimately, to be a good lawyer.

Don't overlook the way *you* can use the personal statement. The personal statement is your chance to tell the committees about yourself on *your terms*, not theirs. If there's something about you that you really want committees to consider, stress it and expand on it in your personal statement; it's to your advantage to show how you differ from the rest of the pack.

### CHOOSING A TOPIC

First, your essay should be about yourself. While this may seem obvious, many students err by expounding on their theories of law and society. It's possible that candidates have something interesting to say about those topics but, unfortunately, admission committees find those views irrelevant. Similarly, far too many candidates try to show how dedicated they are to the study of law through their personal statement ("I've wanted to be a lawyer since 8<sup>th</sup> grade"; "my parents say I love to argue"; "I find the law to be so fascinating.") Admission committees read literally thousands of essays like these each year, and are bored silly by them. What the committees really want is an essay that tells them something--*anything*--in a new light. The prelaw advisor has a binder with examples of unique personal statements written by IU undergraduates. While, for obvious reasons, you must generate your own theme, these statements can give you a head start.

To that end, write about something interesting and unusual about you. Use the personal statement to tell the admission committee something about you that they would not be able to figure out from reading your application. Some potential ideas or themes include:

1. Work experience while attending school, which made college a tougher road for you;
2. Unique perspectives you may have through unusual experiences such as travel, a physical handicap, internships, or special athletic abilities;
3. Special talents, hobbies, or accomplishments unrelated to law that make you interesting;
4. Describe a goal you worked toward or an obstacle overcome;
5. Your strong commitment to improving the quality of life in some aspect of society, the environment, the poor, etc. *WARNING:* Don't hesitate to choose this type of topic if you are sincere, but do this *only* if you can show how your past *actions* demonstrate your commitment and ideals. The worst thing you can do is to choose a topic like this only because you think it's what the committee wants to hear; law professors love to hunt for phonies.

If you find yourself re-stating many of the accomplishments or honors you have already listed on your application, it's time for some editing. Instead of rehashing information the admission committees have already read elsewhere in your application, discuss one subject in more detail. Tell them *why* you chose to be so active in a particular club, *what you learned* in your internship, *why* a certain job, experience, or mentor was important to you. Narrow down your subject and use one or two examples to illustrate your special qualifications.

Some law schools will provide a topic. If they do, follow it to the letter. Most law schools, however, will ask for a somewhat open-ended essay, for example:

"The Admissions Committee finds it useful, in acting on applications, to have a personal statement regarding personal experiences, backgrounds, talents, or any other matters which indicate why your application should be favorably considered." (Indiana University Bloomington)

"You may prepare and submit an essay. . . which describes your reasons for wishing to attend law school and which describes your plans for using your intended legal education. Your essay should not exceed six hundred words." (DePaul University)

These requests are different--if you plan to apply to more than one school, the same basic idea may work; but plan to alter it to exactly fit what the law school requests.

## ADDRESSING WEAKNESSES

You may wish to address things you see as weaknesses in your record. If you believe your candidacy has a weak point that you think could be put into perspective by further elaboration, that may be a valid subject for your statement. However, many such topics—such as a history of poor performance on standardized exams; a poor semester or year due to illness or personal problems; problems with the law—are usually better addressed in a separate **letter of addendum**—and NOT in the personal statement. Consult a prelaw advisor if you have questions.

Part of the admission committee's job is to examine closely your entire application. The issue is not whether the weak parts of an application will be noticed, but on whose terms the weaknesses will be evaluated. If you address a weakness, you can frame the discussion on your terms, and perhaps defuse the importance of that information. As one admissions officer states, "the fact of the matter is that unless applicants deal with their good and bad points up front in their way, we will deal with them in our way."

Don't be apologetic! Each candidate has wonderful, positive things to talk about. Remember, it is often more appropriate to write your personal statement about whatever topic you'd really like, and include a short supplemental statement to address a weakness. Talk with a prelaw advisor about how to discuss a low LSAT score or any other weakness.

## STYLE AND FORMAT

Some law schools will set a page or word limit on the length of the personal statement. If they don't, a good guideline is two to three typewritten, double-spaced pages. A long dissertation will not impress an overworked admissions officer. A few words over the limit are fine, but don't write three extra pages. Make sure that the typeface, the margins, and the paragraphing of the statement make it attractive and inviting to read.

Remember the importance of showing your writing ability. Keep the statement short, concise, and clear. Avoid the temptation to use what might seem like "lawyerly" language; it sounds pretentious. Good lawyers don't use a lot of words like "whereas" and "hereby," anyway.

Use your creativity in coming up with a topic about yourself that is interesting, choosing descriptive words, and designing clear sentences. In general, it is a bad idea to devise an unusual format, such as a mini-play or dialogue or to pretend to argue your case for admission to a mythical court or jury. If you're dying to try something creative, give it a shot. Show it to a number of people to get their impression. If their reaction is "because I know you, it makes sense," don't use it. Remember that the statement provides everything the admission committee will know about you; your statement must stand-alone. Too much "creativity" in format can leave a committee still wondering who you are.

## EXTRA HINTS

1. When discussing special activities or employment, don't simply say, for example, "I was a two-year member of IUUSA." Admission committees may not be able to figure out what an activity or group is. Explain what the activity is, describe your role, and tell why it has been important to you. Don't merely list your activities again in the personal statement (a prose resume)--be exact and descriptive, telling about your unique contribution to the group.
2. When writing, outline the statement, write it, then rewrite it--several times. Put it aside and look at it again with fresh eyes. Strive to develop a statement that is coherent and flows from one sentence to the next. This will involve more than one weekend of work!
3. Proofread carefully. Lapses in grammar or syntax create doubt about your ability to write well, and errors in typing or spelling reflect poorly on your attention to detail. Don't rely on spell-check alone!
4. Ask several people to look over your personal statement for editing and opinions about style and message. Make sure a trusted friend or teacher agrees that your statement says something helpful about you, and conveys the message you want to send. Additionally, try to show the statement to people who don't know you so well, as that will more closely follow what will happen in the admission process.

You may want to use the Writing Tutorial Services in Ballantine Hall for editing advice. Also, remember that the prelaw advisors are here to help! While we cannot edit the statement for you, feel free to bring it in for a second (or third) opinion. When making an appointment to go over your personal statement with the prelaw advisor, try to bring a draft to the office a day or so before the appointment, or send it as an email attachment, so the advisor can read over it and make notes before you come in. See also, links to "Writing a Personal Statement" at the "Law" Career Interest Area of our website.

You may use e-mail to ask questions and communicate with advisors, by sending it to: [udivhpp@indiana.edu](mailto:udivhpp@indiana.edu). All correspondence regarding your recommendation file should be sent to [recserve@indiana.edu](mailto:recserve@indiana.edu). Visit HPPLC's web site to see notices of upcoming meetings, campus visitations, and other items of interest. To access the HPPLC pages, visit: <http://www.indiana.edu/~udivhpp>.

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