

# WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

## What is the purpose of the personal statement?

The purpose of the personal statement is to gather information about you outside of your academic performance, LSAT score and extracurricular involvement. Think of it as a written interview, one where you have control of the questions and answers. 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.

## Possible Topic Areas

- Your motivation for a career as a law professional
- The influence of your family/early experiences on your life
- The influence of extracurricular, work or volunteer experiences on your life
- Personal philosophies as related to your goals
- How you've overcome an obstacle or disadvantage

## Before You Begin

- Brainstorm
- Engage in self-reflection exercises
- Free-write
- Decide your approach in terms of content
- Think about your readers and tailor your message
- Write an outline

## Writing Process

- Get started writing 1<sup>st</sup> draft
- Revise, Revise, Revise
- Obtain feedback from others
- Proofread

## Q and A

**Q. How long should the process of writing a personal statement take?**

A. Probably longer than you'd like. Give yourself plenty of time to go through this writing process. The more revising you can do, the better your statement will be.

**Q. Who should I ask to read my work?**

A. A multitude of perspectives is good. You should ask someone who knows you well and others who don't know you very well. Listen to the feedback and don't take it personally.

**Q. How do I know when I'm done writing and revising?**

A. Only you can know the answer to this question. When you read it out loud and feel satisfied with the result, you're probably done!

**Q. How should I handle optional essay questions?**

A. Answer them. Never miss an opportunity to communicate with the admissions committee.

- Q. **Should I talk about a bad semester or a bad grade on my transcript within the personal statement?**
- A. No. If there is something on your record that needs further explanation, address this in a separate letter or addendum to your application. Your personal statement should stick to the positives.

### General Advice

- **Answer the questions** that are asked. Don't use the same statement for all applications.
- **Tell a story.** Show or demonstrate your points using concrete examples from your experience.
- **Be specific.** Broad sweeping statements will not make you stand out as an individual. Illustrate your points with personal examples or experiences.
- **Find an angle.** An angle helps you to focus and make your statement interesting.
- **Have a strong opening paragraph.** Your first paragraph should state your thesis and grab the reader's attention.
- **Avoid clichés and quotes.** This statement is about you and should not borrow from other's words.
- **Write well.** Be meticulous about your writing style. Type and proofread your essay very carefully.
- **Don't write a descriptive resume.** This is a common mistake. Don't restate your resume in prose. This information can be found in other parts of your application.
- **Avoid writing about high school experiences.** Professional schools will expect that you have had significant experiences while in college.
- **Be positive.** Don't badmouth the profession.
- **Be honest.**
- **Find a balance between 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 concise.** This is greatly appreciated by those who are reading thousands of applications.
- **It's hard to be a stand-up comedian.** Humor is difficult and can be misinterpreted. It's best to avoid it.

## Tips for Writing Your Best Law School Personal Statement

1. Your personal statement should give a sense of who you are – your values and passion, but don't beg for admission!
2. Law schools want to know who you are – not the specialty area that interests you. Law schools want you to be open to all areas of law.
3. Your personal statement is a substitute for the interview. Law schools deliberately do not have interviews because they expect applicants to utilize the English language, since the written word is an important part of being a lawyer. Use the essay to write about what you would have said in the interview. Here's an example: If you had 5 minutes to make a pitch about yourself in an interview, figure out what you would say, speak into a tape recorder, play it back, and write about it.
4. Don't use your personal statement as a time to review your resume and waste valuable space! Keep your personal statement limited to what has been stated on the application.
5. Your statement should be personal and self-revealing, but not maudlin. Use good judgment by not writing something *too* personal. Your statement must sound like you, not like a legal brief; it can have a "chatty" tone, but should be written in your own voice.
6. Let the reader in on the process. For example, explain why you did something, or what caused you to make a change in life circumstance, or what led you to law school. You should lay out the process in your statement – include anecdotes, how you problem-solved, what you expected, and what you learned about yourself. The reader should be able to understand how your mind works, and how you

came to a particular conclusion, without giving every detail. Engage the reader and lead the reader to the conclusions you want; in other words, “show, don’t tell”.

7. Use good judgment. Don’t be too intimate in your statement; use discretion – it is a balancing act. Everything you write about must be true, but you don’t have to tell everything about you!
8. Don’t name traits – describe them. For example, instead of saying you are hard working, provide an example or evidence for your claim. (i.e., “I was studying so hard, I was locked overnight in the library.”) Tell a story that highlights the traits you want someone to learn about you.
9. Always be positive in your personal statement. Even if you are writing about something sad, end your story on a positive note (i.e., turning your life around.)
10. Your personal statement should be non-speculative. You should stick to writing about the past and the present. Let the law schools draw their own conclusions about your future.
11. Pick a story (or two related stories) that most define you. The story should be distinctive so that it gives you a “label” as a candidate. You want the law school to REMEMBER you as “the candidate who wrote about [something good and memorable]”. Your essay should be prosaic, and constructed around a metaphor, theme, or label. It should be written in-depth enough so that it says something important about you. Law schools want classic prose – write intellectually acute – not cute!
12. Seek feedback on your personal statement from trusted friends, faculty, and pre-professional advisors.

## **The Six Biggest Errors in Writing Your Personal Statement**

1. Having spelling and grammar errors. Don’t rely on spell check to catch everything!
2. Having a statement in your essay that reads “I really want to go to Duke Law School”, but sending it in an envelope to Northwestern University.
3. Putting your resume information in your personal statement.
4. Focusing on your weaknesses, whining, and giving excuses.
5. Writing a personal statement that is too cute – for example, starting with a famous quote, using a crazy font, or printing it on pink paper or with green ink.
6. Writing a personal statement that is not personal at all or lacks any self-revelation.