Your Personal Statement

The personal statement is your opportunity to say something about yourself that is not apparent in the rest of your application. Remember to dedicate quality time to choosing a topic that is compelling and will draw the reader’s attention.

Personal Statement Basics

It is an essay. There should be a clear structure with an introductory paragraph, topic sentences, and a conclusion that develops a dominant theme throughout the essay. The ideas and sentences do not have to be complex. Write for clarity. Present experiences that develop your ideas. Grades, tests, and recommendations determine your intellectual ability whereas the personal statement establishes how effectively you can communicate.

It should be clear and vibrant. The style should be honest and concise. Obscure references, pretentious phrases, and ostentatious vocabulary will not be taken as eloquence. The tone should be confident, and the statement should be positive. Explain grades and test scores elsewhere.

It should be tailored to your audience. Admissions officers universally agree on one request, “Don’t bore me.” After reading your personal statement, the admissions committee should know who you are, your personal goals, and most importantly, be convinced that you know yourself and your capability for legal study.

It is an image of you. An essay that is a mere formality is a missed opportunity. For yourself, as well as the admissions committee, the personal statement is a chance to identify the significance of your past experiences, current purpose, and future goals. This is one of your best opportunities to become more than just an LSAT score and a GPA. Most law schools do not offer admissions interviews. Your personal statement is your interview. Ultimately, it will provide the admissions committee with more information regarding the perspective you will bring to their entering class.

Read the prompt. While most schools ask for an open-ended double-spaced two pages, some ask for something more specific or give you four pages that they want you to take full advantage of. Make sure to you know what each schools wants!

Tailoring your essay for schools. Law schools are aware of the constraints on a student’s time, so unless a school specifically requests a tailored essay in the application, one is not expected. However, you should research the schools to which you are applying, and if there is anything specific about a school that draws your interest or which you think would make you a more attractive candidate for admission, then write a tailored essay. Here are some things to think about when deciding whether to tailor your essay:

- Does the school have a particular religious affiliation?
- Does the school look for students from a particular background?
- Is the school particularly strong in an area in which you are interested?
IDEAS TO GET YOU STARTED

The following topics are presented as suggestions for theme ideas but your ideas may lead you in a different direction. You could elaborate on something noted, but not fully developed or explained in your application, or address a new subject or issue entirely. If you are struggling with the initial steps, make an appointment with one of the Pre-Law advisors (213.740.2534). Create an outline and first draft, and then put it aside for a while.

1. Your background or a significant life experience and how it has influenced you and/or prepared you for the study of law.
2. A special interest (e.g. artistic, dramatic, athletic, writing, etc.), how you have cultivated it, and the influence it has had on your development.
3. Honors, awards, accomplishments, or leadership of which you are particularly proud and why.
4. Minority status (e.g. race, culture, sexual orientation) and how this status has impacted your life, perspectives, experiences, and choices.
5. A special interest in a particular school and why. Give specific reasons supporting your assertion that you are well-suited to a school.
6. Extracurricular activity or competition in which you participated and how that influenced you.
7. Work or volunteer experience and how it influenced you.
8. Time spent studying abroad and how it influenced you.
9. An obstacle you’ve overcome and how the process/end result has influenced you. What did you learn about yourself as a result?
10. Undergraduate academic experiences (such as working with a professor on a research project) and how they have influenced you, or intellectually challenging courses and their impact on you.
11. Influential person(s) in your life and how/why s/he has influenced you.
12. Special circumstances not noted elsewhere in the application (such as working a significant number of hours per week while enrolled in a full-time academic program, extraordinary family obligations, etc.) and their impact on you.
13. How you have changed and matured during your undergraduate years and the evidence to support your claim. This may be an effective way to explain inconsistencies or weaknesses in your record, or lack of focus/purpose early in your college career. However, most law schools allow you to write a separate addendum addressing hardship you have faced and overcome. The use of an addendum is most appropriate to address problems or inconsistencies in your objective criteria (LSAT score and GPA.)

Thanks to Gail Dyer of Providence College for much of the above material
Bad Topics

The following is a list of some of topics that, while popular, generally do not result in great personal statements.

1. A laundry list of your accomplishments: This is known as the résumé essay. Other parts of the application ask you to list your accomplishments. Do not waste your personal statement simply restating them in essay form.

2. An essay that is really about someone else: While an essay about an influential person in your life can be a good topic, make sure that your personality shines through. The admissions office is looking to see if they want to admit you, not your grandmother.

3. The think piece: Your personal statement is not the place for you to expound on abstract ideas or theories, especially those related to the law. Admissions officers use other parts of your application to figure out how smart you are. Your personal statement should be something that will be easy for an admissions officer to digest after they have read 2,000 other applications.

4. Your passion for fighting poverty and oppression: First, this is a topic that would be better placed in your statement of purpose, not your personal statement. Second, admissions officers are somewhat jaded when it comes to these types of statements because so few students end up in a public-interest job after graduation.

5. Excuses: Use an addendum to explain why your grades dropped, etc. Your personal statement should be used to tell the admissions officers why you are great, not to discuss a shortcoming.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Pre-Law Advisors
CAS Room 120
(213) 740-2534
http://dornsife.usc.edu/pre-law/
Email your personal statement to the Pre-Law Interns at: prelaw@usc.edu

The Writing Center
THH 321
(213) 740-3691
Mon-Thurs 9 a.m. – 6 p.m. Fri 9 a.m. – 3 p.m.
http://dornsife.usc.edu/writingcenter/