

Applying to Law School

I have served on – or been involved in - the law school admissions process at three different law schools, for an aggregate of at least fifteen years. The law school admissions office processes both applications from aspiring applicants and from students who want to transfer from a different law school after their first year. Some of my more spectacular successes: I helped a student transfer from a bottom tier law school to one in the top ten per cent. I helped several other students transfer from bottom tier law schools to schools in the top twenty five per cent.

As a law student you basically only get one chance to transfer. It comes after the end of your first year. A few law schools have rolling admissions and can squeeze you in after your first semester, but that is not an option you can count on.

Admissions committees vary slightly from law school to law school. Most tweak their internal processes from year to year. But they all operate on essentially the same model. Here is your peek into that process, from your perspective and, also, from theirs.

The New Applicant

Your Advance Work

The application process starts months before you actually apply. It starts with the multipart process of taking the Law School Admissions Test. First key piece of advice: Pay for an LSAT Prep course! The day is long gone – if in fact it ever existed – when you could simply study your way to a good LSAT score. However much we might want to think that a smart, hard working person will naturally rise to the top of the heap, that is simply not true. Most people take at least one LSAT prep course, and many take two. If you don't take even one course it's like saying "I want to get a bad score!" It doesn't matter how hard you study on your own - you need to have the test explained to you, and you need to practice test taking strategies. That is the second part of your advance work: practice, practice, practice. Take practice tests under actual timed conditions. If you are a cigarette smoker, practice not smoking for the duration of the test. Take a practice test when you are hungry. Take another when you are freezing cold. If you do this enough, the actual test will be comparatively pleasant.

Are you doomed if you get a bad LSAT score? No. That score will not completely disappear for seven years, but if you retake the LSAT and improve dramatically that improved score shows up. Some years ago the ABA allowed law schools to average the two scores and report the result. For some shorter periods of time the ABA has allowed law schools to simply report the higher score for a prospective student and ignore the lower score.

If a law school has an evening division it may not be required to report LSAT scores for admits into the evening division at all. This is a useful piece of information to tuck in your back pocket. If you have a decent application packet overall, with a well written personal statement, good references and so on, *and* you apply to the evening division, you are much more likely to be admitted. Earn good grades your first year as an evening student *and you can easily transfer from a school's night division to its day division*. This bears repeating. Sometimes a member of the law school admission committee will suggest that you apply for admission to the evening division as well as the day division. Usually no one tells you anything. If your LSAT score and GPA are weak, you can cover your bases by applying to both the school's day division and its evening division.

So let's assume you followed the advice I gave earlier in this post, took an LSAT prep course and took the LSAT. Assume you got a decent score. Not the one you might have wanted, maybe, but then who ever gets exactly what they want? More about the implications of your LSAT score in a minute.

The Starting Point

Begin the application process by getting a handle on your audience. Understanding your audience will be key to your success throughout law school and beyond. Thinking about your audience's perspective now will not only contribute to a great personal statement, it will be a critical skill later, first as a law student and then as a lawyer.

Your audience will be the admissions director or a member of his or her staff. Unless your grades and LSAT scores are through the roof – making you “an automatic admit” – your audience will also include a member or two of the law school faculty. Members of the law school faculty all serve on law school committees: committees that work on law school business ranging from curricular changes to student disciplinary matters. Sometimes members of the faculty get placed on the committee that they want to be on. Sometimes they don't really want to be on *any* committee. Sometimes they are “drafted.”

I point this out because you may not always get an audience of people who all *really* want to read admissions applications or who are all *really* anxious to understand the real you. If you follow my basic guidelines, however, this is not a problem. You will have the grumpiest member of the faculty “eating out of your hand,” so to speak, and voting to admit you.

References

Law schools general ask for two or three references as part of the application process. Who should you ask to write one for you?

Do NOT ask a family friend. A letter of reference that begins “I have known Bobby since he was a small child...” is virtually useless. If Mr. or Ms. Reference-Giver has known you that long, he or she likes you. That is a given, and it is not useful information for someone reviewing your application. Also, the typical I-knew-her-as-a-child reference person is unlikely to be familiar with the qualities that make a strong law student: academic interests, for example, or a determined pursuit of some intellectual skill, such as a foreign language.

What about a political figure, like the mayor who you campaigned for, or perhaps a senator with whom you interned? A reference from this type of person is truly effective only if you had a fairly prominent role on his or her staff. Were you paid? Were you part of the inner circle, privy to policy discussions? If Senator Reference-Giver just puts your name on the short but glowing form letter that he or she writes for many constituents and for the many children of many constituents, the letter is, again, virtually useless. I have actually come across the same form letter from the same politician - with the names changed, of course - in a single pile of admission applications.

What about the priest from your parish church or the rabbi from your temple? Should you ask them for a law school reference? *Are you serious?* No.

It is unfortunate but true: Piety does not get you into law school.

How about your supervisor when you worked in retail? This person might well be able to attest to your work ethic, your good character, your ability to be an effective member of a team. This is all well and good, but only one reference should come from your work experience, and if you use a reference from a job it must not be the *only* reference you submit. References from your work experience are a little suspect, as far as the admissions committee is concerned. Is the letter really a dispassionate evaluation written by your supervisor? And is that person really your supervisor? Or is the letter writer really your buddy from work? In the jaded world of the law school admissions committee, the work-experience-letter-of-reference lacks a certain quality control.

What law school admission committee folks really want is a letter of reference from an academic. This preference is partly practical. In law school, you need to study and process information, show up for class and write papers. An undergraduate college program most closely resembles the law school curriculum, so your undergraduate professor’s assessment of you is particularly valuable. Furthermore, the fact that the reference is written by a professor offers a reassuring degree of quality control. And, finally, we might as well call a spade a spade: law school faculty and administrators prefer academic references because they are snobs. Not every single one, of course, but the phrase “ivory tower” was invented for a reason.

Oh no, you are saying to yourself, none of my undergrad professors even know who I am!

Whether or not you are still an undergraduate, you can, and should, fix that problem immediately. If the semester or quarter has not ended, raise your hand in class when there is an opportunity. Go to at least one professor's office hours. If you can't go to office hours, make an appointment. When you go to the professor's office, ask a question about the reading or the class. Tell the professor how much you enjoy the class. How interested you are in the subject matter. Every professor wants to hear that students like the class. That's what we love about teaching! It's like water on a wilted plant. You will need to repeat this process a few times. It's called a relationship.

Even if the semester has ended you can go through the same process. It may be a little more difficult or time consuming, since you may be working or no longer on campus, but it is the only thing you can do. Find out when the professor has office hours, or make an appointment. Tell the professor how much you enjoyed the class when you took it, how much you enjoyed the readings and why the material is even more interesting to you now. It's not more interesting? Give it more thought. Practically everything is interesting when you really think about it and try to put it into some kind of context. And the stakes are pretty high.

I know, you feel like there are at least twenty seven other things you'd rather do, things that you *need* to do – but, believe me, there is really no alternative. I've seen plenty of references where the student did not take these steps, and asked the professor for a reference anyway. Many well-meaning professors will try to oblige. The result reads something like this:

“Dear Admissions Committee Members,

Mr. Student Applicant was like, um, in my English literature class. I see his name right here on my roll sheet.

Sincerely,

Professor E. Literature”

I'm exaggerating a bit here to make my point, but, really, no one is fooled. If the admissions committee member is in a bad mood anyway, he or she may be downright ticked off. So do the legwork first!

What if you think you have a relationship with a professor. You ask him or her for a reference and the professor says, “I think someone else may be better at this than I would be.” What do you do?

Run – and thank your lucky stars that the professor was decent enough to say something. What the professor has probably said to you in Secret Professor Speak is “I don't like you. I don't know why you think I do, and I don't care. Go away.” There

are few things as shocking in the world of admissions files as reading a really negative letter from a professor about a student. Don't let that student be you.

One last piece of practical advice. Whoever you have chosen to write references, the Law School Admissions Council provides a vehicle for your recommender's letter to be sent to all the law schools to which you are applying. The LSAC process is a wonderful convenience. You pay a fee, and create an account with a user name and password. Your recommenders submit letters to LSAC.

Back in the day, as we say, the LSAC submission process was absolutely baffling. The law school where I was teaching seven or eight years ago actually appointed a secretary whose job was to make submissions for clueless faculty members like me. LSAC has become much more user friendly as years passed, and I could probably make a submission on my own now, at least if I really put my shoulder to the wheel. Recently, though, when Mark, a former student of mine, wanted to transfer to a "top twenty five" law school he cut and pasted LSAC information into an email to me. It made submitting my (glowing) reference easy, and I knew right then that Mark would be a star as an upper classman at his new law school and an amazing success as a lawyer. He had figured out his audience – me – and tailored his request accordingly.

How to Write the Personal Statement for your Application

Begin this process by getting a handle on your audience. Understanding your audience will be key to your success throughout law school and beyond. Thinking about your audience's perspective now will not only contribute to a great personal statement, it will be a critical skill later.

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I point this out because you may not always get an audience of people who all *really* want to read admissions statements or who are all *really* anxious to understand the real you. If you follow my basic guidelines, however, this is not a problem. You will have the grumpiest member of the faculty "eating out of your hand," so to speak, and voting to admit you.

Before we start with the "do's," lets get some basic "don't's" out of the way.

First, don't skip the personal statement, even if the application says it is optional. This is not so much a "don't" as it is a "don't be fooled." The personal statement is *not* optional, no matter what the application says, at least not if you want to be admitted to that particular law school. If you don't write a personal statement, those on the admissions committee will think you are not committed to attending law school. The thinking goes something like this: "*Jane Smith didn't make the effort to write a personal statement. She won't make the effort to be prepared for her law school classes. She won't make the effort to pass the bar, so she'll fail. The school's ranking will go down. The end of the world will come.*" Well, maybe not the last sentence, but I have heard the first four more often than I can count.

Not writing a personal statement is like putting yourself in the "automatic deny" category.

Second, stay within the page limit or word count. Not a single word over! Law professors and judges are passionate about page limits and word counts, perhaps because so much of law is reading, evaluating and writing responses. In law school, a professor may give you a huge point deduction if the memo you write in your legal writing class exceeds the specified word count. If you are writing to a court, the judge may reject your legal brief because it is over the page limit and order you to bring it within the prescribed limit. Even if your client is facing really hard time in prison or a million dollar fine, and you think that those eleven extra words are critical. I once watched a hearing in just such a case. The lawyers had asked the court for permission to exceed the word limit. The judge said no, but gave them a hearing. At the hearing, the public defenders – normally tough cookies, every one - were practically in tears. The district attorney didn't even object to giving the public defenders an extra hundred words. But an extension of word count limits was nowhere on the judge's radar. And he was a kind and decent person.

You might as well get used to this mindset now.

While we are talking mechanics, don't single space your statement and don't use space-and-a-half spacing. Double space it - and use font no smaller than Times New Roman 12. This may seem superficial, even silly, but it makes your statement easy to read, and being easy to read is no small virtue when your reader has hundreds of personal statements to read. Better to say less, but know that the admission committee members will actually read what you have to say. Double spacing and larger font are also a plus because, as a colleague on an admissions committee once told me, "We're all as old as dirt, and my eyes are going." He said this as he tossed an application file into the "reject" pile. Now, I'm not going to comment on whether we law professors are, collectively, as old as dirt compared to the general population, but as far as our eyesight goes, why take a chance?

So -- double space and use at least 12 point font!

Applications to law school ask you to disclose all offenses you have committed that are more serious than a parking ticket. This has always seemed excessive to me, or perhaps I should say misplaced. The typical offenses that underlie attorney discipline complaints are comingling client funds and failing to communicate with clients. I was an assistant disciplinary counsel prior to entering academia, and I remember many complaints that alleged that attorneys dipped into client funds and many others that alleged that the attorney failed to communicate with the client. I don't remember a single complaint centered on an attorney's speeding tickets. But, whatever. If you just got a speeding ticket, disclose it. Explain that you have learned your lesson. You will never, never, *ever* speed again.

Ever.

This is really the secret to handling *any* blips in your application to law school. Were you at a noisy party in college when the police were called? Did you use a fake ID to get into a bar when you were underage – and get caught? Don't gloss over these less-than-stellar moments with vague generalities. This will always strike your reader as shady. Instead, use those blips to explain how much you have learned. Explain in detail. As you will see in other posts on this website, details are the key to bringing a story to life, and persuading the reader to see things your way.

Also, don't be discouraged just because your life has included some blips. Although law schools want students with no criminal past, law schools also need students who have had some life experience. Students with life experience can add variety and insight to the law school classroom. Furthermore, law school can be a pressure cooker of stress. Someone who has slipped off "the straight and narrow path" - and managed to climb back on - may be able to navigate the rigors of law school more easily.

My own favorite admissions committee story involves an application in which the prospective student disclosed that he had once been caught stealing a pair of socks from an elite department store that I will not name. His LSAT was high. His other qualifications were stellar. His apology for his misconduct was abject. He explained the circumstances that led to his folly in excruciating detail. I said to the assembled members of the committee, "He is truly sorry for what he did. He is *less* likely to commit petty theft than anyone else we have admitted today." I added "Who among us has not thought that the XXX department store overcharges for socks?!"

We admitted him.

What if your LSAT is not great and maybe your undergraduate GPA is not that great either. Do *not* write that you are not good at standardized test taking! That is like writing "I will probably not pass the bar." If circumstances explain a poor LSAT score, by all means present those circumstances to the committee. Maybe you couldn't take an LSAT prep course. That certainly placed you at a huge disadvantage. Maybe you had to work sixty hours a week in the week leading up to the test date.

Maybe there was a death in the family shortly before the test date. State that circumstances are now different and you will retake the LSAT. That will usually keep you out of the “reject” pile.

One last key “don’t.” Prospective students often begin or end a personal statement by quoting some legal icon like Sir Thomas More or Oliver Wendell Holmes. I think that they fear that their personal statement will seem ordinary if it doesn’t include an eloquent quote. Banish this thought. A personal statement that begins with such a quote makes me cringe. At worst you look a little pretentious, showing off how well read you are. At best, the fact that you were moved by their writings tells me nothing. Pretty much all of us have been moved by their writings. I need to know about *you*.

“Ordinary” is good.

Now some “do’s”

The first step is to think about how you would introduce yourself in an interview. Law schools rarely conduct interviews, so this is your chance to make that introduction.

Are there any circumstances that you need to explain? Were your undergraduate grades poor, and your junior and senior grades much better? Such improvement is really important to the admissions committee. Committee members may notice it on their own, but much better to point it out and explain it. Maybe you were away from home for the first time and you were homesick. Not the grandest explanation in the world, but members of the admissions committee will generally respond positively. They understand homesickness, and even better, they know that you’ve now learned to conquer it. Maybe college was your first experience of life in the big city. Or of life out from under the thumb of fairly strict parents. These circumstances are common, and will often explain a weak GPA to the satisfaction of the admissions committee, at least as long as you improved after your first or second year.

What if your GPA started out high at the beginning of your college career, but declined when you were a junior? This is trickier. Was there something going on in your life that affected your grades? Hopefully it was something that you could fix, or it was a circumstance that has now changed. If you write that to the committee that you simply got tired of school it will “play” quite differently than if you write that you suffered from a health problem that has now been successfully resolved.

In addition to any explanations you need to give, tell the committee about the experiences that make you want to become a lawyer. I have seen advice on line admonishing prospective students to “create a narrative,” or words to that effect. Yes, I suppose, but I want to put it to you much more simply. Tell me, your reader, a story, so that I can see you as a person, and begin to understand what makes you tick.

I've read effective personal statements that told a story about life with a handicapped sibling, or life in the United States after being raised in a foreign country or the experience of moving from one region of this country to another. I've read effective personal statements that focused on the writer's volunteer work or travels or graduate school experience. Jaded as I am, I was glued to my chair by a personal statement wherein the writer told me he had been born to a single mother "who was still a child herself" and, as a baby, was found "crawling in a street by a garbage man." It was not only a compelling tale of survival against all odds. It was also a chance for me to actually *feel* the writer's desire to practice public interest law. The common thread in excellent personal statements is that there is a story, plus the intimacy that this sequence of events gave you a chance to develop skills that will make you a good lawyer.

Suppose you do not think you have any particularly dramatic story to tell. I think that you probably do, and you just don't know it. Let me give you a couple of examples. My examples don't all involve law school applications, but, as I think you'll see, the principle is the same.

First, Anne. (As an irrelevant aside, when writers use a name they usually say grandly "this is not her real name." Oh come on now, what if it is? Can you *really* tell which Anne I'm talking about? I think not. But back to my story.) Anne was a middle class white girl, who went to private school and otherwise divided her time between her divorced parents. She endured the complications arising from their strained relationship, but that was not so much a story as it was a sort of background noise.

When Anne turned sixteen she set out to get a job. She had no grand aspirations. She didn't want to make the world a better place. But she really didn't want to have to beg for spending money or sit in either of two empty houses, waiting for one parent or the other to get home. Of course jobs for sixteen year olds, are hard to come by, but, finally, Anne got a job as a nurses' aide at a home for the aged. This is pretty uninteresting so far, right? Anne worked the 3-to-11 shift.

Anne's job involved helping the infirm residents eat dinner, get bathed and get ready for bed. The most exciting thing in her day was being assigned six fairly easy-going residents as opposed to six irritable ones.

Anne took her dinner break, as scheduled, with other nurses' aides, and everyone talked. That's when something really interesting started to happen.

The other nurses' aides were all from a different world than Anne. They were poor black women, some who worked two jobs, all of them with children, none of them, as far as Anne could tell, with a husband. But Anne was desperate to get along – the alternative, remember, was sitting in an empty house and begging for spending money. Anne started to go home at the end of the shift with one of her fellow nurses' aides or another. She slept on their couches and played with their children. Neither

of her parents knew what to make of this. In an odd way, Anne had gotten her first taste of freedom.

Anne might not have been able to articulate it exactly this way, but I think if you had asked her she would have been able to tell you that she had come to understand, and even love, people from an entirely different world. Nothing dramatic, but the chance to see life through a new lens is the stuff of a good personal statement. It's all in the telling.

My second example is Irving. Irving lived in a suffocating home in a suffocating small town in a suffocating part of upstate New York. (My apologies to the fun, edgy parts of upstate New York. I obviously couldn't mean you.) Irving worked in a large, unionized factory during his summer vacations, sweeping floors. One day a member of the union was "written up" for sleeping on the job. "Writing [someone] up" is management-speak for creating a record so that you can fire someone you don't like. The union denied the sleeping-on-the-job allegation and everyone walked off the job, Irving included. Irving had never thought much about the intersection of management and underlings. It doesn't come up much in suffocating places such as the ones Irving inhabited. But it suddenly struck him that the issue was not really whether that specific worker had fallen asleep on the job or not. In a sense, the sleeping man was Everyman. If "they" don't like you – no matter who you are, and no matter what reason they choose to give – they can screw you. And if there is no the union to take your side, you're toast.

Behold, out of a suffocating wilderness, another compelling personal statement is born!

The common thread is in *showing*, not *telling*, the reader what happened. Anne could have simply written that she got to know people from a different background, and Irving could have written that he gained skills that would serve him well in the practice of law. Had either taken this route, Anne would still be working the 3-11 shift and Irving would have perfected floor sweeping years ago.

I Finished My First Year at a Lower Tier Law School – Should I Transfer?

Yes.

No question.

It is possible to get a good education at a lower tier law school. The lower tier's school's admissions staff will tell you it does not matter where you go to law school. But sadly, it does matter where you graduate from law school. If you move from a bottom tier law school to one in the top half of all law schools, it will open doors for you that you never would have otherwise even seen.

If this bothers you, you are not alone. U.S. News and World Reports goes to great lengths to state that its rankings are not the be-all and end-all. The A.B.A. itself has commented on the phenomenon. See, for example http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/the_pedigree_problem_are_law_school_ties_choking_the_profession

How Law School Admissions Committees Actually Work

The LSAT and the GPA

This is your peek into the law school's side of the process that starts once you have applied.

The Law School Admission Test purportedly tests your potential for success in law school. Law schools admit or reject applicants based on a formula that includes the student's undergraduate grade point average (GPA or UGPA) and LSAT score. Some adjustments are made to promote diversity of all kinds: racial, regional, ethnic and cultural. Some consideration is given to the quality of the applicant's undergraduate institution. In fact, there is an index that provides a numerical rating for the institution. In theory, at least, this allows someone who went to Rigorous University, majored in economics and has an overall GPA of 3.0 to be accepted over a student who attended Happy Time University, majored in jogging and has an overall GPA of 4.0.

It is far from a perfect system, however. Law schools have to report the GPA's and LSAT scores of their admits, and this reporting does not include any information about the undergraduate major. So, realistically, when a school has admitted a group of applicants from schools like Rigorous University who had demanding majors, a few may well be admitted from schools like Happy Time U. who majored in human sexuality to make the law school numbers look better. Yes, there is such a thing as a major in human sexuality. I have no idea what courses it includes, but, as an aside, it can't be helpful to have that on your resume when you are trying to land your first "real" job.

Recommendations

I wrote earlier about *who* you should ask to write you a letter of recommendation. Now here is the effect of those letters.

If your recommender goes into detail, that has a very positive effect on the admissions committee, particularly if your credentials place you on the line between "accept" and "reject." When someone takes the time and puts in the effort to write more than a page about you, it is essentially a character reference. Also, if your personal statement has attracted positive attention from a reviewer, then the reviewer may use your recommendations to argue that you should be admitted even if your LSAT and GPA are on the low side.

When Should I Apply to Law School as either a Potential Law Student or a Transfer?

Strangely, this can make a difference, and to understand this you have to see yourself from the law school's point of view.

You, the potential law student, are a commodity. The school needs you in exactly the same way that a company that packages raisins needs plenty of grapes. The law school needs to fill classrooms. Unless the law school is at the "very top of the heap" – this year that would be Yale – the law school needs student tuition dollars. I'll go back to this "commodity" idea in my post about Life in Law School as a student. For now, just think about the process going on behind the scenes at the law school between January and, approximately April.

The law school needs students, but it also needs students with good LSATs and GPAs. The information about an entering class affects its reputation. If you are a student with amazing scores, grades and no criminal background, you can expect to be snapped up as soon as you apply. If you are not that student, the law school has a problem. Should they admit you? What if a more statistically impressive student comes along? Should they wait list you? What if you get impatient with the uncertainty and accept an offer from a lower tier school? What if the supply of twenty-something college graduates is not as plentiful as predicted? You see the problem.

Let's say that slowly, slowly the entering class fills up. As the start of the semester draws near, the admissions office staff is under even more pressure to fill the seats. At one institution, that I will not name, I remember an admissions meeting at which the director looked positively frightened. She clutched the application file of a student who had a minor criminal record and mediocre grades. "Let's hang onto him a little longer," she begged. "We might need him!"

The bottom line: if you apply late in the admissions cycle, right before the semester begins, you may well increase your chances of being admitted.

One more wild card in this admissions process: seat deposits. You may be accepted at several law schools. Each school would like to know you are definitely going to attend. You do not want to let any school definitely know that you are going to attend until you have heard from everywhere you applied. You want to know all your options! Each law school deals with this conundrum by requiring seat deposits. The seat deposit is just what it sounds like: it reserves your seat, in the entering class, or, if you are a transfer student, in the second year class. Seat deposits can range from \$100 to \$900. It may seem like a waste of money to pay two seat deposits at two different schools to preserve your options. It is not. Think of it this way. Soon you will be in some law school's bookstore shelling out over a thousand

dollars for one semester of law books. You will be able to sell those books at the end of the semester, but it will be for pennies on the dollar. Law school is not cheap. Grit your teeth and pay several seat deposits if you need to. This is not the time to economize.