

Personal Statements

PLAN TO ATTEND A PERSONAL STATEMENT WORKSHOP - see ppa.byu.edu for dates,times, zoom links.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

- The LSAT and GPA are gatekeepers—the personal statement is what gets you accepted. Law schools want to know if you are going to add something to the class, if you are going to bring a different perspective from anyone else, and if you are going to stick with it.
- Don't worry about what you think law schools will be looking for—they have already seen it all. Instead, write about you. You can focus on your background, interesting hobbies, unusual experiences—whatever brings you to life and makes you more than just a number. For example, one student wrote about his weekend hobby of waterskiing; another student wrote about her failed research experiment, another wrote about going bald.
- The key is not to just write about the experience itself; explain why the experience makes you unique and interesting.

GETTING STARTED

- Format: Length should typically be about 2 pages, double-spaced. Use 1-inch margins and size 11–12 pt. conservative font (e.g. Times New Roman). Watch for specific restrictions for different schools (i.e. word count, font, or page limit). There is no need to title it or put your name and LSAC number in the header.
- Theme: How do your stories all tie together? Your theme can be as general as overcoming challenges or facing new experiences, or it can be as specific as mastering the piano or running a marathon.
- Introduction: You don't need a formal introduction. However, be aware of cliché attention getters (e.g. “It was a dark and stormy night”).
- Body: You have two basic options: Tell a series of short experiences. Around 2 to 4 is usually a good number. Tell one experience, but use different aspects of that experience to show different characteristics or traits.
- Style: Show, don't tell. Instead of telling how much you like to help other people, show them. For example, use a story about the friendship you developed with a handicapped child who you played board games with (but make sure the focus stays on you—not on the child). This is not a résumé. Don't just talk about your daily duties at your job as a research assistant. Instead, pick a certain experience and turn it into a story. For example, if you are a TA, don't just talk about how you grade papers and teach labs. Rather, zero in on a specific incident or a challenge that you had to overcome. So what? Don't just write about your cool stories. Make sure that you explain why your stories matter or how they changed you. Ask yourself, “What will the reader learn about me from this story?” What lessons did you learn or what qualities did you develop?
- Transitions: Connect your stories so that the reader understands your sequencing. Some examples of transitions between paragraphs are “I continued to develop my passion for dance as I . . .” or “Another time in my life that I had to deal with this problem was when I . . .”
- Conclusion: Write a 3–5 sentence conclusion considering the following: How does your theme tie into law? Think about it this way “Why is law the logical next step?”

POLISH

- Expect to go through many drafts before getting to a final version—probably more drafts than you think. Don't get discouraged; this is part of the process.
- Your personal statement should have no glaring typos or grammatical errors. Lawyers are paid to pay attention to detail. Show them you already can.
- The Preprofessional Editor is available and can help with all steps of the process, from brainstorming to checking your grammar and punctuation. However, to truly use this resource, do not come in for the first time an hour before you plan to submit your personal statement.
- Friends and family members can also be resources. However, remember that personal statement advice is subjective. Everyone will have an opinion on what you should write about and those opinions may not always agree with each other. Be careful of having too many people provide you with their suggestions.

PERSONAL STATEMENT DON'TS

- Don't be afraid to talk about yourself—this is a personal statement. Don't worry about the use of "I," and make sure that your stories are focused on yourself and not on other people.
- Don't play down your experiences. Err on the side of being too boastful. Our office can help you tone it down if it's too much.
- Don't regurgitate your résumé or summarize your life.
- Don't quote people. It usually ends up just being annoying and ineffective. Members of the admissions committee are very educated, and trying to quote others often comes off as you trying (unsuccessfully) to impress or teach.
- Don't explain bad grades or poor LSAT scores in a personal statement. Do this in an addendum.
- Don't stick in the filler line at the end that says, "And that is why I want to go to _____school."

THE MISSION

- Don't mention your mission just to mention your mission. It's great to talk about, but make sure that you are telling a specific story or experience. Also make sure the focus stays on you. Instead of telling a story about another person's difficult situation, talk about how seeing this changed you and helped you improve and then show how it has made a lasting impact (beyond the time on your mission).
- Admissions committees do already know quite a bit about missions. You don't need to overview that you went to bed at 10 and got up at 6 and that you didn't visit your family for two years.
- Use proselytizing, not proselyting.
- Unique is better. One dean dismissed an applicant's story about being held at gunpoint in Brazil simply because "what missionary in Brazil hasn't had that experience?"

GRAMMAR & MECHANICAL TIPS

- Watch out for there/their/they're, it's/its, loose/lose, lead/led, effect/affect, you're/your, then/than.
- You only need one space after each sentence, not two.
- Avoid very, a lot, really and other forms of hyperbole. Be specific.
- Use vivid language and imagery. But be wary of approaching this as creative non-fiction. You need to show the scene but going over the top rarely works.
- Use hyphens (-) to hyphenate words and em dashes (—) when you are using a dash in place of a comma or a colon or to add emphasis.
- When possible, use strong verbs instead of excessive adverbs (e.g. instead of "walked slowly," use "trudged") or auxiliary verbs (e.g. instead of "I would work," use "I worked").
- When you have two independent clauses, use a comma after for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.
- Watch out for the phrase "able to". You can eliminate that phrase altogether most of the time (e.g. "I was able to volunteer" vs. "I volunteered").