

Getting Started On Your Personal Statement

WRITE A TIMELINE OF YOUR LIFE (starting after high school)

Taking the time to write out a timeline gives you a starting point for your personal statement. Include anything that was meaningful to you, like running a marathon, taking a road trip, breaking off an engagement, volunteering, quitting a job, etc. This is a quick, easy way to get you thinking about the most important theme of your essay: you! If you're still at the beginning of your college career, try to keep a timeline as you go along—it's a lot simpler than trying to remember everything right before you apply to law school.

TALK TO FRIENDS & FAMILY

Your personal statement is about you—you're selling yourself to the admissions committee. It can be tough to identify your best qualities on your own, so take the time to talk to your friends and family. These are the people that know you best, so get their opinion. Don't tell them that this is for law school—otherwise you may get some cliché answers like how you negotiated a later curfew or a better grade. Instead, ask them, "What are my best qualities?" (Remember, you're trying to sell yourself) You may be surprised at what they say, and their answers can help spark ideas you never would have considered on your own.

BRAINSTORM

After identifying your best qualities, brainstorm. How did you develop these qualities? Why do others know you have these qualities? What experiences have you had that demonstrate these qualities? This is where going back to your timeline becomes useful—you can start going through all the milestones you wrote down and identify the experiences that emphasize these qualities.

FREE-WRITE

Often students obsess about writing their personal statement in a two-hour chunk of time they have set aside. This can lead to frustration and writer's block. Instead, using all the information you have from your timeline, conversations with friends and family, and brainstorming, sit down and free-write for a few minutes about one theme or idea that you find interesting. Sometimes ideas or stories you think are great just don't translate well to paper. Free-writing in small time increments will help you find which stories work best for you.

FIND A THEME

Once you've gone through the free-write process, look at what worked best and ask yourself, "What is my theme?" What exactly do I want the admissions committee to know about me and do these experiences illustrate that? You may want to choose several stories that all showcase the same strength; you could also focus on different aspects of the same story. Either way, choosing a specific theme will help keep the essay unified and focused.

POLISH, POLISH, POLISH

Although you are not writing this paper for a "grade," the basics of good writing are still important. Does every paragraph have a topic sentence? Do your paragraphs flow smoothly and include appropriate transitions? Have you checked and rechecked the spelling, grammar, and punctuation? Be willing to work through multiple drafts before you are ready to submit the finished product.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF AS YOU EXPLORE WHAT TO WRITE ABOUT IN YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

Reflect upon your journey and growth process and what has gotten you to the point you are at.

1. Who are the influential people in my life?
2. What are the influential elements of my life?
3. What are my “forks” in the road?
4. How do I describe myself?
5. How do others describe me?
6. What are my hopes and dreams?
7. Why do I want to be a legal professional?
8. What do I hope to accomplish in this field? Why can’t that be accomplished in another field?
9. Who are my role models?
10. What are the most important things in my life?
11. What makes me unique?
12. What gives me confidence?
13. What brings me joy?
14. What keeps me up at night?
15. What has surprised me lately?
16. What are my hobbies? Why do I like them?
17. What are the lessons I have learned in life and where did I learn them?
18. What makes me sad? Happy?
19. What does my ideal world look like?
20. How have my loved ones influenced my journey?
21. If I could change one thing about my life, what would it be? Why?
22. If I could change one thing about the profession, what would it be? Why?
23. What do I bring to the profession that others might not?
24. What assumptions do people make about me?
25. What is something about me that people could never guess?
26. What are my strengths? What are my limitations?
27. What have I learned preparing for this professional school program?
28. What is the greatest hardship I’ve faced in life?
29. What have I learned from adversity?
30. How do I respond to challenges?
31. What part of my life is unrelated to this profession?
32. What are my aspirations if I don’t get into this professional school, etc.? What other career would come close to offering what this profession does?
33. What is my preferred way to communicate? Why?
34. What are elements of my culture that are most important to me? How has my culture influenced my life?
35. What about my background is visible or invisible to this profession?
36. What groups do I belong to and how have they influenced me?
37. What identities do I carry and how do those identities influence my worldview and my passion for this profession?
38. What are the pros and cons of a career in this profession?

Questions courtesy of Sunny Nakae – Advise for Application Season