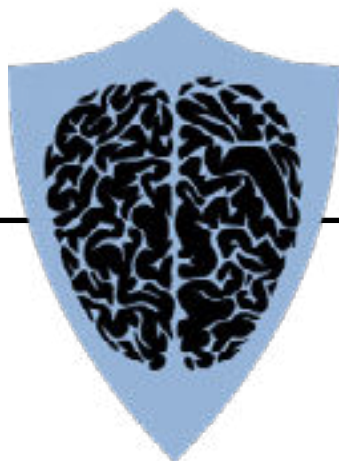

AN INGENIUS PREP E-BOOKLET

SO YOU WANT TO ATTEND YALE LAW SCHOOL?

*Lessons from Nearly Two Decades at
the YLS Admissions Office*

PART I



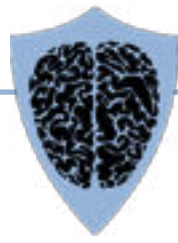


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BEFORE APPLYING: WHY, WHEN, WHERE

1. What is the most important question in applying to Law School?

Sometimes applicants “put the cart before the horse.” They ask themselves “what will I do after college?” and come up with “Law School” as the answer. They then proceed to develop a strategy for application and admission to the law schools which are commonly-accepted as the best in the nation. This process leaves out the most important question “Might I enjoy practicing law?” This is a particularly common trap for people applying to the top law schools. Students are so in awe of the opportunities that present themselves to graduates of Yale, Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, NYU, and others that they say to themselves (and often said to me as the Director of Admissions at Yale Law School) that they wanted to come to Yale because with a Yale Law degree they could do whatever they wanted to in life.

They weren't wrong in thinking that the granting of a degree from Yale Law School was an imprimatur of sorts. Because of the intense competition for admission, students were already “certified” as very smart and capable. Three years of intense engagement with very bright fellow students under the tutelage of outstanding legal scholars could only make them more valuable as employees and leaders. It's no wonder that many YLS graduates go on to important positions in business, politics and civic life.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of students graduating from the top law schools do go on to practice law – the profession for which their education trained them. And what if it turns out that the student doesn't really want to practice law? Several years and hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent with no clear outcome. For students at Yale Law School, the financial consequences are not as significant as at some other schools in that the Law School's loan forgiveness program applies to employment other than legal employment, so

that people may make other employment decisions without forfeiting the benefits of that program. In shaping the loan forgiveness program in this way, the School is acknowledging its pride in graduates who do choose other paths.

This doesn't mean that the answer "Do I want to be a lawyer" has to be a clear "yes." Sometimes the education in itself has a value that students will never regret. And a path may open to some other opportunity might open that would have been closed without that education and the school's network. But it is still the most important question to ask.

2. Should I take time off before Law School?

There are **several specific situations** that might make it a good idea to take some time off between your undergraduate years and law school:

If you don't want to focus on your law school application during your senior year of college:

Successful applicants to top law schools are people who have been deeply engaged in their pursuits during college. During senior year, such students may be doing independent research, writing senior theses, playing major leadership roles in campus organizations. These are people who may not want to put all that on hold to prepare for the LSAT and prepare a strong Law School application. They may want to put all their energies into strong academic performance and campus community commitments while they are still in college. If they have the means of support for an "in-between" year, they may want to take it, and law schools will respect that.

If your academic record has been getting stronger:

Many, if not most, law school admissions decisions are made with

from three years of academic work in hand. If your academic work has been improving steadily, you may want to put all your senior year energy into keeping up that improving performance and present a full four years of work to the law school admissions committee.

If you're not yet sure you want to be a lawyer:

A year or two post-college would be an ideal time to test out whether or not you want to be a lawyer. Many students work as paralegals, as entry-level consultants, or as interns in some aspect of legal practice; others work in civic, political or social justice organizations with overlaps with the legal world. Don't think, however, that a specific internship or work opportunity makes you a shoo-in for admission. In my years at Yale Law School, working as a staffer on Capitol Hill or teaching in English in China did not make you unusual; rather, it identified you as very much like a large number of people in the YLS applicant pool. If you are looking for a way to really stand out and distinguish yourself, you should work with one of our fabulous Graduate Coaches to help you with your candidacy-building process. No cookie cutter approach is going to work for you, and determining what you want to do in your year(s) off, or if you even want to be a lawyer in the first place, will require personalized attention.

If you're sure you want to be a lawyer, but there are some things you want to do before you commit yourself to that demanding profession.

Once you begin the process of legal education and move from there into some form of legal practice, there will be very little free time to indulge your other interests and passions (yet one more reason to be sure you might enjoy practicing law!). There may be something that you love that you want to pursue before you let it take a back seat to your study – travel, a master's in a favorite academic discipline, giving back to the community (such as serving as a Teach for America fellow), and many others.

If you want to add another academic credential

Many law schools have acknowledged “specialties.” In some cases, these specialties are represented by joint degree opportunities; in others, by centers of inquiry; in still others, simply by a preponderance of faculty with expertise in those particular areas of jurisprudence and/or practice. For example, one of Yale Law School’s acknowledged “specialties” is training future legal academics. So, faculty readers will be very pleased to see applications which include advanced study in relevant disciplines. The value placed at Yale Law on academic disciplines which have important overlap with law can be seen in the fact that a number of tenured faculty do not have law degrees.

As with most other life decisions related to law school applications, you should only undertake an advanced academic degree because you want to, not because it will look good on an application to law school; this is especially the case at Yale. It’s too time-consuming and expensive to be worth the effort if it doesn’t have a value in itself. But if, for example, you are very interested in a specific academic discipline that will overlap with subjects you want to study in law school, it may well be a plus to your application to present a degree in that area. For example, one Yale faculty member actually quite preferred that his students have a good, separate grounding in history before considering legal history as a career choice.

3. How do I decide where to go to law school?

In answer to this question, I affirm the conventional wisdom: you should choose some dream, realistic, and safety schools. These criteria are defined in large part by your numerical credentials, your LSAT score and GPA.

A dream school is simply a school you’d love to attend, whether or

not your credentials indicate any chance of admission. If the school's stats indicate that no one with your numerical credentials has been admitted in the last several years, you should go into the process with your eyes wide open, knowing that your chances aren't good. But aiming high can inspire you to present the best possible application, which will help your chances of admission at schools where you are "in the ballpark" but not a sure thing. We have certainly seen cases where we would reach far below the 25th percentile of admitted students in previous years as far as GPAs and LSATs were concerned where we saw a particularly compelling applicant shine through the stack of pages in front of us.

Realistic schools are ones where a large percentage of the people who apply with credentials like yours are admitted. These are the schools where the non-quantitative aspects of your application can really make the most difference in helping you stand out from the rest of the pack.

Safety schools are the ones where virtually all applicants with credentials like yours are admitted. One caution here: take the choice of safety schools just as seriously as you do the choice of the dream and realistic schools and think clearly about whether you would actually attend one of these schools if you were admitted. As with other basic questions, you don't have to have a clear answer to this question when you start, but you ought to keep it in mind as you move along in the process. If you're not admitted to a dream or realistic school, you might decide to do something else altogether rather than attending your safety school. This is an instance when one might decide to take a year or two to do something else and decide later whether or not you want to re-apply to law school.

4. Where do I think I might want to practice?

Geography should play a background role in your decision about

where to apply and to attend Law School. Placement resources in the top law schools are phenomenal, and general employment opportunities go much deeper into the class than at less well-known law schools. Their focus, however, is on major firms in big cities and in their local markets. If that is where you want to practice, their assistance will make job hunting easy for you. If you want to be somewhere else, however, you need to take that into account. Your job hunt may require more research on your part. Your connections in Law School form the basis of your future network, and you'll want to take that into account in choosing your school.

PRE-LAW: WHAT YOU CAN DO TO GET READY BEFORE APPLYING

5. Does it matter where I attend undergraduate school?

The answer to this question is “yes.” And this is a hard answer for many applicants to hear. Choices of undergraduate institution are often less in a student’s control than later choices about graduate or professional education and training. And students do not want to feel penalized for choices made when they were still young.

Looking at this from the point of view of an admissions officer or a faculty admissions reader may be helpful. Law school admissions decision makers are looking for the best students they can find for their schools. LSAT and GPA are major data for potential student quality, but the decision makers need to use all the information at their disposal. Among that information is the reputation of the undergraduate institution the student attended. An applicant may feel (and sometimes appropriately so) that reputation is a “soft” indicator, amounting almost to a prejudice. Reputations of undergraduate institutions are built, however, to a large extent on harder data, such as the quality of the students accepted into the institution, the credentials of the faculty, and evaluations by outside organizations.

In my experience at Yale Law School, admissions readers knew more about the undergraduate education at other Ivy League schools, small liberal arts colleges in the northeast, and a handful of state universities with powerful reputations than they did about other colleges throughout the country. It was my job as an admissions officer to share the information I had about these colleges with the faculty readers, but I could not evaluate the application for them. Students who had perfect LSAT scores and straight-A averages (along with strong writing, activities and personal statements, of course) from less well-known institutions were often admitted through the initial review process, rather than taking a chance on a denial by faculty readers based on lack of knowledge of the institution. As the Dean of Admissions at the time said, “this student couldn’t have done better.” And we didn’t want to send negative messages to those academic institutions. This was an individual choice by the Dean of Admissions at the time and was a strategy endorsed by the academic leadership of the school.

But individuals in leadership change, and an applicant cannot rely on the knowledge of an individual admissions officer to guarantee that all the readers will know his/her undergraduate institution. So, as part of the application strategy, the applicant needs to assess how to get across to the admissions readers the strength of his/her education, without shifting the focus of the reader to the institution from the appropriate focus on the student. Decisions about how to do this will be made on a case-by-case basis, but here are a few ideas: think about the credentials of the people writing your letters and have them state those credentials in their letters; make reference to alumni of your school who are also alumni of the law school or of similarly-ranked law schools; think of other significant alumni of your school and weave their success into the narrative of your application; describe, as part of your personal statement, how you chose your undergraduate institution and how it has been a positive experience for you, etc.

Prior to your application, while you are still making choices about the shape of your undergraduate institution, you should take advantage of all the best resources your college has to offer. For example, if you are in a large public university, make sure you take advantage of any opportunities to take courses in smaller settings. These courses will require more direct participation on your part, will likely require regular written work (as opposed to tests alone) and may enable closer relationships with faculty that will result in stronger, more useful letters of recommendations. If your college has an honors program or honors courses, take advantage of those classes.

Some applicants may include law school admissions prospects as part of their strategy for choosing a college, but I think this reasoning may get in the way of choosing the best institution for a young person at that time in his/her life. Focus on getting the best undergraduate education that you can afford at a school you want to attend, and then describe that education as part of your law school application when the time comes.

6. What shall my major be in college?

As a rule, law school admissions officers do not express a preference for any particular undergraduate major. They are looking for excellent academic performance and potential and find those things in undergraduate academic records and LSAT scores more than in any specific major. They are looking for academic records that indicate that the applicant has acquired significant skills in writing and thinking. Typical majors for undergraduates interested in considering a career in law include history, philosophy, English, political science, economics, and other social sciences. In addition to being seen as rigorous majors, education in these disciplines provides important general knowledge that is often assumed as shared background material in future work contexts as legal professionals. Any law school would find these majors suitable.

Admissions officers will look askance, however, at majors that might be understood as narrowly “pre-vocational,” such as elementary education, business, or even pre-legal studies. In evaluating a non-traditional major, admissions officers have to evaluate the intellectual rigor of an academic course of study. For example, non-traditional majors such as the sciences, mathematics and music theory are interesting because those disciplines require quite rigorous thinking. In evaluating the application of someone with a major in one of these disciplines, an admissions officer will want to be sure that communication skills, especially writing, are fully developed as well. The admissions officer may take a longer look at the required admissions essays in the case of these majors, or at the grades in courses outside the major. They will also look in the personal statements and in the letters of recommendation for clues that the choice of law as a profession makes sense for the individual.

7. Are LSAT scores really important?

The short answer is “yes.” Don’t spend time spinning your wheels trying to convince a law school admissions office that your LSAT score does not reflect your ability. True, there are some special intellectual tasks required for the LSAT, and you need to **practice and prepare** for those. In general, however, performance on the LSAT reflects thinking and reasoning skills you have acquired over time. The LSAC has studied first-year grades and has shown that the LSAT score is a better indicator of first-year academic performance than GPA.

If there was a special circumstance around your test or you have a history of out-performing standardized tests, let the law school know that. And then let it go.

Having said this, if your LSAT is in a law school’s “ballpark,” everything else in your file is what matters. And the LSAC encourages law schools not to overemphasize the LSAT score (especially taking into

account the statistical range around your score that more accurately reflects your ability). I remember one instance at Yale when I was encouraging a faculty member not to give too much credence to the LSAT by itself. He felt that the score was the only thing that was not subjective, and that he had to give the score the most weight in his decision-making. Within a week, I had a file in hand to show him. The applicant's LSAT score was 4 points below Yale's median score at the time. At the same time, the applicant presented a very strong GPA from Harvard College in history, the academic interest of this particular Yale Law professor. I took the file to show him. By chance, he also knew personally one of the applicant's recommenders. He immediately agreed that this LSAT became less important in this circumstance.

8. Shall I take an LSAT prep course? Shall I take the test again if I don't do well the first time?

The answer to the first question is similar to the answer to the question "Shall I hire a tutor for chemistry? It depends on how well you're doing on your own.

The [Law School Admission Council \(LSAC\)](#) has done significant research on the test, including research on self-reported test preparation. The findings indicate that practice is the most important factor. People who take test prep courses do not necessarily do better than people who practice on their own. You may get released practice tests from LSAC or you may purchase test prep books that include practice tests and test-taking tips. Try these methods and see how you're doing. If you're still not satisfied that the scores on the practice tests you're taking reflect your ability or simply are not high enough to put you in the ballpark for schools you're interested in, you may want to consider signing up for a test prep course. Some of the test prep agencies offer scholarships, so be sure to inquire about that if your financial resources are small.

Be sure to do some of your practicing in real test conditions, as it is the anxiety of the timed test that can sometimes undermine performance. Advisors on some campuses offer practice tests simulating real test conditions. Or you can hire a friend to time you and make sure you stop when the timer goes off!

If you don't do as well as you'd like on the LSAT the first time you take it, yes do it again. But let's back up...Be prepared to do your very best the first time you take it. The LSAC will report all your scores to the law schools, but LSAC research indicates that the average score is a better statistical predictor of academic performance in the first year of law school than any individual score taken separately. If there was a reason that you didn't do well on the first test, please let the law schools know in your application materials. Understandable reasons include illness the day of the test, family issues that arose around the time of the test, arriving at the test center at the last minute because of traffic problems, etc. These reasons don't convince an admissions officer to disregard your score, but they can help an admissions officer decide to give you the benefit of the doubt if your score is just slightly below the school's normal range or to give more credence to a later, higher score if your gpa is also strong.

If you are in need of a referral to a good test prep instructor, we have network of the highest-calibre tutors (many of whom were used by our instructors themselves when they applied). We also have partnerships with some of these companies - including [Velocity LSAT](#) (run by the inimitable Dave Hall), as well as [Next Step Test Preparation](#), which is great for 1-on-1 tutoring.

9. What are the best extracurricular activities for a law school application?

Extracurricular activities are usually the "icing on the cake." They are not usually central to the decision-making process. Let me start,

however, by giving you a counter-example. Debate is a frequent activity of pre-law students. And success in that extracurricular arena tells an **admissions officer** a lot about a student's potential interest in the close reasoning, love for argument, and pleasure in public speaking that are the day-to-day experience of law students and of many lawyers, especially litigators. So success in debate is an indicator of a good fit for law school. But many other extra-curricular activities don't tell us much about success in school or in the field. Rather, they tell us whether this person works well with others, what kind of a community member the person will be in our schools, and, ultimately, what kind of community member the person will be when a member of the bar. Unlike undergraduate institutions, law schools do not need to fill places in orchestras or sports teams, so they do not need to look for that kind of extracurricular skill. They do love, however, the community that is created by a diversity of interest and experience.

Legal professionals are often recruited into leadership roles in the community, and leadership at the undergraduate level is a good indicator that the person will enjoy that role in the future. For some students, the activities they present in their applications might actually have a different label, rather than "extra-curricular," which implies that they take place at the side of the academic curriculum. Some people are already playing leadership roles in their communities as undergraduates, such as the person in my memory who had served on the City Council of Cambridge, Massachusetts during his undergraduate years.

In my experience, almost no leadership experience was discounted – with the exception of fraternity leadership, as that was seen primarily as an extension of self-interest. Even that had its exceptions, as one applicant had a major role in an all-Greek effort related to blood drives on the campus of a major Midwestern university - recognized as a significant effort. Some students may not present any significant extra-curricular activity because their focus has been on their schol-

arship, not just to get good grades, but truly to advance scholarship in a specific area. If this is an area of specific interest to the faculty readers, and the value of the work is validated by letters of recommendation, the lack of extra-curricular activity may not be a problem for the applicant at all.

10. Shall I apply this year and ask for a deferral even if I know I don't want to come until next year?

If you know that you want to take time off and those plans are essentially set, please wait and apply the year you want to come. It saves wear and tear on admissions staff. Law schools know, however, that there are significant fellowship and work opportunities which are not known at the time of your application. Because potential fluctuation in class size is problematic and because schools have an interest in being fair to each year's applicant pool, some schools have policies against deferrals; others limit them. Yale Law School has regularly been generous with deferrals, having invested significant time in making the admit decision and recognizing that the time away generally makes the applicant more attractive, not less.

Deferrals for more than two years are quite rare, and, usually, those are granted for study or work experiences with a defined two-year time-frame. Some law schools grant only one-year deferrals, and some none at all.

* * *

Prior to [applying to law school](#), it is important to build your candidacy early, as admission to law school is becoming more competitive each year. If law school is in your future, [sign up](#) for a one-on-one consultation to find out how [InGenius Prep's admissions experts](#) can mentor you throughout the process, help build your resume, and increase your chances of getting accepted.

Stay tuned for part 2 of my e-book series on **the application process**, as I will be giving detail advice on applying to law school through my perspective as the former Director of Admissions at Yale Law School.

To Be Continued...



Resource weblinks:

[LSAC](#)

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