



# THE LAW SCHOOL PERSONAL STATEMENT

Strategies to Help  
You Get Accepted



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## Strategies to Help You Get Accepted

Law school admissions committees can see your numbers and extracurricular activities on paper, but have absolutely no idea about who you are as a person and what makes you unique. This is where your personal statement comes in. Your law school personal statement is the place to reflect on your interests and background to help set you apart from the rest of the candidates in a tough law school application pool.

While you may have similar grades, extracurriculars, and LSAT scores as the other applicants, your personal statement should stand out as your chance to show law schools your unique story. Take this opportunity to discuss your interests, your travels, or how your cultural identity made you the person who should be admitted. A strong personal statement combines a carefully chosen topic with well-crafted prose.

You might have guessed by now that writing your law school personal statement isn't something you should take for granted. This essay can make a difference even if your GPA and LSAT score aren't quite up to the mark. To help you understand the process more clearly, we will take a closer look at the personal statement prompts from the T-14 schools, talk more in detail about the importance of your personal statement, go over how to pick the right topic, discuss common mistakes people make when writing, as well as review tips for editing your personal statement before submitting your law school application.

# REQUIREMENTS FROM SCHOOL TO SCHOOL

It wouldn't be the wisest decision to submit the same personal statement to all law schools because they're not identical at all! When you apply to law schools via the Law School Admission Council (LSAC), each school has its own personal statement requirements and prompt. The word or page limit varies from school to school as well - it's usually somewhere between two and three pages. So, writing one essay to send to every school won't suffice.

While you can write a barebones essay on one topic to serve as a skeleton, make sure to tweak and expand on it to suit each school's specific question. Some of the prompts are more open-ended than others. All of them want to know you better, understand your personality, and see context and color within your law school application. Outlined below are the personal statement prompts for each of the T-14 law schools.

Rank	Personal Statement Prompt
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## YALE UNIVERSITY

Please submit a personal statement that will enable the admissions committee to make a fully informed judgment on your application. Many applicants include the personal statement they have prepared for other law school applications.



## STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Please attach a statement of about two pages describing important or unusual aspects of yourself not otherwise apparent in your application.



## HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Please submit a brief personal statement. Limit your statement to two pages, typed, double-spaced, minimum 11-point font and 1-inch margins.

The personal statement is intended as an opportunity to give the admissions committee a better sense of who you are as a person and as a potential student and graduate of Harvard Law School. In many instances, applicants have used the personal statement to provide more context on how their experiences and strengths could make them valuable contributors to the Harvard and legal communities, to illuminate their intellectual background and interests, or to clarify or elaborate on other information in their application. Because applicants and their experiences differ, you are the best person to determine the content of your statement.





### **UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO**

Please use the personal statement to introduce yourself to the admissions committee and to help the committee get to know you on a personal level. It should demonstrate your potential contribution to the law school community beyond simply academics and should demonstrate your ability to communicate your thoughts effectively. The admissions committee generally finds that a statement that focuses on a unique personal attribute or experience is usually the most informative (as opposed to a restatement of your qualifications or résumé).

While there is no page or word limit on the personal statement, please note that the admissions committee values an applicant's ability to communicate thoughts in a clear and concise manner. The admissions committee typically finds that 2-4 pages is a sufficient length for most personal statements.



### **COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**

Candidates to Columbia Law School are required to submit a personal statement supplementing required application materials. We are curious about your interests, goals, and aspirations and how the J.D. program at Columbia can help you achieve these. You are encouraged to think about the contributions you hope to make to both the Columbia community and the legal profession while considering your personal, intellectual, and professional background and any relevant information that you may not have otherwise conveyed through your other application materials. Please note that the personal statement should be double-spaced and approximately two pages in length. This statement should be attached electronically.



### **NEW YORK UNIVERSITY**

Please clearly identify your personal statement and include your name and LSAC Account Number on all attachments.



### **UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA**

The admissions committee requires that every applicant submit an original example of written expression. The purpose of this personal statement is to provide you with as flexible an opportunity as possible to submit information that you deem important to your candidacy. You may wish to describe aspects of your background and interests--intellectual, personal or professional--and how you will uniquely contribute to the Penn Law community and/or the legal profession. Please limit your statement to two pages, double spaced and label it as "Personal Statement" with your name and LSAC account number on each page.





### **UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA**

Your personal statement should provide information, in your own words, you believe relevant to the admissions decision not elicited elsewhere in the application. The statement is your opportunity to tell us about yourself; it may address your intellectual interests, significant accomplishments or obstacles overcome, personal or professional goals, educational achievements, or any way in which your perspective or experiences will add to the richness of the educational environment at the Law School. Please upload your personal statement to your e-application via LSAC.



### **UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN**

As you prepare to write your personal statement, please keep the following in mind. First, we do not have a fixed checklist of particular attributes we seek in our students, and you will have the best insights into what is most important for us to know about you. Second, there is no set convention for communicating the information you choose to share. A successful essay might involve writing directly about expansive themes such as your goals or philosophy or background or identity, or very differently, might be a vignette that reveals something significant about you. In other words, think broadly about what you might wish to convey and how you might best convey it.

While the form and content of your personal statement are up to you, for ease of reading, please use double-spacing and at least an 11-point font.

There is no formula for a successful personal statement, and different individuals will find different topics to be well-suited to them. Applicants have, for example, elaborated on their significant life experiences; meaningful intellectual interests and extracurricular activities; factors inspiring them to obtain a legal education or to pursue particular career goals; significant obstacles met and overcome; special talents or skills; issues of sexual or gender identity; particular political, philosophical, or religious beliefs; socioeconomic challenges; atypical backgrounds, educational paths, employment histories, or prior careers; or experiences and perspectives relating to disadvantage, disability, or discrimination. Any of these subjects, and many more, could be an appropriate basis for communicating important information about yourself that will aid us in reaching a thoughtful decision. The length of your personal statement is up to you.



### **DUKE UNIVERSITY**

You must submit a personal statement with the application. The statement is your opportunity to introduce yourself to the admissions committee and should include (1) what you think have been your significant personal experiences beyond what may be reflected in your academic transcripts and on your résumé, and (2) your personal and career ambitions. If your personal statement does not directly address your interest in attending law school and practicing law, we strongly encourage you to write Optional Essay 1. There is no required length or page limit.

The personal statement, optional essays, and all other writing samples must be your own work. This means that the ideas and expressions originated with you, and you wrote all drafts and the final product. It does not preclude asking family members, friends, pre-law advisors, and others for proofreading assistance or general feedback.



### **NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY**

Include a typed personal statement (recommended length: one to three pages, double-spaced). Please look upon this essay as an opportunity to introduce yourself to members of the admissions committee. In doing so, keep in mind that the committee evaluates applicants in many areas beyond test scores. We encourage you to discuss personal and professional goals that are important to you and to include information about your achievements. Feel free to comment further about your education, background, community involvement, and strengths and weaknesses in certain courses or activities. Please type your name and LSAC account number on the top of each page. The statement should be electronically attached.



### **UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA - BERKELEY**

Please provide more information about yourself in a written personal statement. The subject matter of the essay is up to you, but keep in mind that the reader will be seeking a sense of you as a person and as a potential student and graduate of Berkeley Law.

Berkeley Law seeks to enroll a class with varied backgrounds and interests. If you wish, you may discuss how your interests, background, life experiences, and perspectives would contribute to the diversity of the entering class. If applicable, you may also describe any disadvantages that may have adversely affected your past performance or that you have successfully overcome, including linguistic barriers or a personal or family history of cultural, educational, or socioeconomic disadvantage.

Your personal statement should be limited to four double-spaced pages. The thoughts and words contained therein must be your own and no one else should assist in its creation beyond basic proofreading and critiquing. Please include your name and LSAC account number on each page of the statement.



### **CORNELL UNIVERSITY**

The personal statement is your opportunity to discuss anything that you believe will be relevant to your admission to Cornell Law School. Attach your personal statement here (required).



### **GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY**

You may write your personal statement on any subject of importance that you feel will assist the admissions committee in their decision. Please double-space.

Most of these prompts are open-ended, except the one for Duke. Duke's personal statement has two requirements. First, that you reflect on opportunities you've pursued that aren't mentioned in your resumé, and second, that you discuss your personal career ambitions.

While the others may be broad, some prompts encourage you to choose specific routes when considering your topic. For example, UChicago emphasizes that you should not reiterate your resumé, and your essay should be about something not already covered. On the other hand, Columbia wants to know by the end of the essay why you're interested in going to law school - specifically to Columbia. Similarly, the UPenn admissions committee also wants to know why you've decided to pursue a JD, and how UPenn will help you. For the UC Berkeley essay, you are encouraged to discuss any diversity factors - whether in your interests or your background. Northwestern recommends that you reflect on your personal and professional goals.

As you can see, while one draft reflecting on a particular interest or story could repond to most of these prompts, you cannot - and should not - submit the same essay for all law schools. Make sure your essay is geared toward answering the question each institution asks. Mention the school specifically as well, if applicable.





A pair of metal scales of justice, shown in a dark, moody setting. The scales are slightly out of focus, with the left pan hanging lower than the right. The background is a dark gradient.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PERSONAL STATEMENT IN YOUR APPLICATION

You're going to have to write - all the time - while you're in law school. Your personal statement gives law school admissions committees an idea of your writing style and how you would fare in a writing-intensive curriculum. Like we've mentioned, the personal statement presents an opportunity for the school to get to know you better, and learn something about you that is not apparent from your transcript or resumé. It's crucial that you highlight a story that is your own - not your parents' or your friends' - and one which helps admissions committees understand you beyond your LSAT score and your professional experience.

If your GPA or your LSAT score aren't up to par with the school's median, a strong personal statement can combat the weaknesses in your application. Remember: your personal statement is not the place for you to explain why you have shortcomings in your application. Rather, if your topic and writing are stellar enough, admissions committees might overlook the lower numbers.

There is no typical law student. Law schools don't want their classes to be full of the same type of applicants. The personal statement helps law schools determine how diverse, in terms of race, gender, sexuality, class, and professional and extracurricular background an incoming class will be. So your personal statement is crucial in helping admissions committee members understand who you are, what you value personally and professionally, and where you come from.

# PICKING YOUR TOPIC

## Some questions you could ask yourself are:

- How has your upbringing shaped you? Has your geographical or cultural background made an integral contribution to the way you think or the career path you've chosen?
- What is the most unique or unusual thing about your family?
- Do you have any hobbies that most people don't? What have they taught you?
- What has been your proudest non-academic achievement?
- Where do you excel?
- What is your dream career?
- What kind of law do you wish to pursue?
- What current issues are you most passionate about?
- If you weren't going to law school, what would you be doing?
- When did you first know you wanted to become a lawyer?
- How did your extracurriculars shape your decision to apply to law school?
- What kind of jobs have you worked? Which has been the most memorable or meaningful?
- Did a significant event impact your decision to become a lawyer?
- What has been the greatest challenge you've faced?

When brainstorming topics, take a trip down memory lane. Think about your childhood, your interests, your goals, and your background. Jot down events and parts of your life that stand out - topics don't always have to be about your culture or background. Something that might feel minute like your coin collection or your backpacking trip to Europe during a gap year can spark some inspiration. Once you've picked a few topics that bring out your best storytelling and writing skills, go ahead and write a first draft. Remember to show, not tell!

# MISTAKES TO AVOID

## **REWRITING YOUR RESUMÉ**

We cannot emphasize this enough: do not repeat the information on your transcript and resum . They exist as separate components for a reason.

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## **WRITING ABOUT SOMEONE ELSE**

Never fall into the trap of writing about someone else. Sure, you could dedicate a sentence or two to someone who inspired you, but your own personal story should be at the core of the essay.

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## **STRAYING AWAY FROM THE PROMPT**

The schools have a set of questions for a reason. If Duke asks you to talk about your career ambitions, don't go off on a tangent about what you've done in the past. You have limited space. Don't waste it.

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## **USING PRETENTIOUS LANGUAGE**

Don't sound like a robot! It's your personal statement, and you undoubtedly want your personality to shine through in your writing. Don't use too many long words that may not fit with the rest of your essay, or might not reflect your usual writing style. Taking a dictionary and throwing every other long word you find won't help show who you are - you're not a poet or an SAT tutor, you're trying to get into law school! Flowery language can make you sound ingenuine.

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## **TRYING TO FINISH TOO FAST**

Don't rush through and then skip the time to revise. The last thing you want is to turn in your first draft! There's always room for editing. Errors can be easily avoided through some careful proofreading. Of course, make sure your spelling and grammar are all correct.

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## **EXAGGERATING ADVERSITY**

The applicant pool contains people who have experienced abuse, homelessness, natural disasters, and serious losses. If your adversity is not as grave in comparison to these powerful stories, don't write about adversity. If you suffered from chicken pox, there's no need to write lines and lines about the pain you experienced. Or if your friend was bullied in high school and you were simply a witness, you should not be writing about all the torment you suffered and how you grew from the experience!

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## **DISCUSSING ACADEMIC INCONSISTENCIES**

Your personal statement is NOT the place where you talk about why your junior spring grades fell drastically due to an emergency. Law schools usually have an addendum section for cases such as this. Don't waste your page limit focusing on bad grades when you can be writing a glowing, positive essay instead!

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## **LIVING IN THE PAST**

You're an adult now. There's no way your biggest accomplishment to date is an award you won in high school. You've been through at least four years of college since, seen more places, met more people, and gained much greater knowledge and experiences. Your character has grown a lot, and law school admissions officers want to see that. Don't write about your love for your high school debate club or how you led your high school Model UN team to multiple championships.

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## **MIXING UP SCHOOLS**

Don't send the wrong letter to the wrong school. Your Harvard Law essay cannot have the word "Yale" all over, or in fact anywhere. Make sure you've checked and double checked that you're sending the essays to the right school, and maintained each of their word or page limits.



A black and white photograph of a pair of glasses and a pair of scales of justice on a desk. The scales are in the foreground, and the glasses are to the left. The background is a blurred laptop screen.

# EDITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

Once you've got that first draft out of your system, it's time to edit and polish your work. It wouldn't hurt to take a couple days away from your essay, and then come back and review it again. Read it out loud. That way, you can spot errors or sentences that don't flow as well as you might have thought they did the first time around. Have a parent, friend, or coworker read it. Another set of eyes and opinions is a great way to improve and catch silly errors.

When checking for typos, don't rely on spell checkers. They don't always catch similar-sounding words, such as where vs. were. Make sure your sentences aren't too long. Transitions between paragraphs should also be smooth. Remember, the quality of your writing will be evaluated alongside the content of your personal statement. Check back with the prompt to ensure that you've answered what they've asked, and not gone off on a completely separate tangent. The editing process is just as important as the writing, and taking the time to sit down and go through multiple drafts goes a long way toward helping your personal statement stand out.

Your law school personal statement is your chance to showcase your individuality and provide more information on how your upbringing, activities, and interests can not only contribute to an esteemed law school, but also make a difference in the world after you graduate. No matter what you decide to write about, use your personal statement as a chance to go beyond your grades and work experience. Let the admissions committee get to know what makes you tick, and help them realize why you would be a wonderful asset to their institution.