

Finding the Words: How to Write a Personal Statement

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A personal statement answers two questions for law schools:
“Who are you?” and “Can you write?”

1. Before you write, think expansively and then plan deliberately.

Consider the times in your life that most vividly reflect your character and personality, or that demonstrate your commitment and initiative.

Present yourself as someone who has made decisions based on informed choices. Show that you are self-aware and self-directed.

Explore ways to generate interest and achieve clarity.

Create an impression and make a memory for the reader. You are advocating for yourself.

“Freewriting” – writing for a set amount of time without stopping and with no thought to grammar or spelling - may help you start or help you generate new ideas.

2. Start by setting your style and structure.

Titles and epigraphs (quotations at the beginning of your essay) are not advisable and can be distracting.

The essay should have an introduction, paragraphs with topic sentences, and a conclusion.

Write a working introduction just to get started. The introduction you actually use may be the last part of the essay that you write.

Develop a narrative that flows logically and supports a theme.

While the final essay should be about two pages long, early drafts will vary in length. Start by getting the main elements of the story you want to tell down on paper, then edit or expand the piece.

The conclusion should summarize the points you want to convey and re-affirm your intentions.

3. Keep the focus on you.

Show who you are by addressing these questions:

- What have you learned from your experience?
- What do you want to learn more about? (generally – not necessarily the law)
- What are you motivated to do next? (again, generally – not a specific area of law)

While you might include information about someone who has been an important influence for you, the key elements of the story should be your observations, thoughts and feelings.

4. Tell your story in your own voice.

The essay does not have to be dramatic or heroic. Your intelligence will become evident through a broad perspective that indicates your understanding and specific perceptions that demonstrate your insight.

Write about something you like or something you know. Be willing to start over if your theme isn't working out.

“Don't teach, don't preach, and don't make a speech.” Your readers believe they know what the law is and what lawyers do.

If you enjoy writing the piece, it will show and your audience will enjoy reading it.

5. Use clear concise language.

The essay takes the place of an interview, so “talk” to the reader. While the essay should be lively and expressive, it is not an exercise in creative writing. It is an exercise in communication.

A statement is stronger with fewer adjectives and adverbs. Limit the use of metaphors and allegories, if you use them at all.

Use active verbs. (“The boy sailed the boat” not “the boat was sailed by the boy.”)

Give specific examples that support your assertions and your purpose.

6. Writing about the law

Usually, law schools do not require that you state in your essay why you want to be a lawyer, why you are applying to law school, or what area of law you want to pursue. If writing about the law is not specifically required, consider writing more broadly about your experiences and goals.

If there is a required question about becoming a lawyer, be specific and substantive in your reasons. This is where being self-aware and self-directed is essential. Some of the reasons may seem obvious to you. Present those reasons positively and from your perspective. You may want to become a lawyer because you enjoy the power of words, advocacy, or the role of a constructively engaged expert. You may want to become a lawyer because you have seen (have experience and can discuss with understanding) what lawyers can do and you want to do that work.

While others have said that you would be a good lawyer, or you have relatives that are lawyers or you have always wanted to be a lawyer, these facts are not significant by themselves. Unless they are essential to the main theme of the essay, do not include them.

If you choose to write about the law as part of your essay, consider incorporating your ideas into your concluding paragraph. Connect how studying for *this* degree, at *this* school and in *this* program will help you realize your intentions. You can also write a separate short addenda or letter addressing this subject as another option.

7. Spend some time, seek advice and then take ownership.

An essay that presents your ideas accurately and articulately will require several drafts, with time to think between versions.

Complete a first draft and review it after a little time has passed. Ask yourself if the work presents a positive impression of someone who is proactive, resourceful, and resilient.

Edit the text for clarity, the paragraphs for strength and purpose, the structure for logic, and the completed essay for message and style.

Show your edited draft to a friend or two. Ask them if it sounded engaging, like you, and like you meant it. Listen carefully to their reactions to see if they understood your meaning and to hear their reactions.

Show an edited draft to an advisor. Ask for impressions and recommendations about style and content. Ask the same advisor to review a completed final draft.

Limit the number of drafts you show to others. When you consider revisions, the goal is to improve the strength of your own voice expressing the ideas you want your readers to remember. In the end, this is your personal statement.

Finally, proofread the essay. Check syntax, grammar, and spelling carefully. Do not rely on spell-check computer applications. Then let the law schools know what you are thinking: send it.

