

# The Essay and the Personal Statement

## **Essay Writing Workshop**

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### **Essay Writing Workshop**

(The ideas described below are meant for pre-law advisors, but the methods can be used by students.)

The purpose for conducting an essay writing workshop is to help students get past that first stumbling block of not knowing where or how to get started. As the outline indicates, it provides for at least two segments of "free writing" (or "forced writing" as some students have renamed it) of about 5-10 minutes each, which involve putting pencil to paper at the word "start" and writing without stopping for a specified period of time. Refining the first sample in a second free writing exercise serves to help students get additional ideas down on paper. The last exercise is one in which they draw from their free writing those ideas that they would like to use in writing a more polished essay. They are given twenty to twenty-five minutes in which to complete it and, in this case, may pause to think as they write. Students are then divided into small groups of five where they read their essays aloud and gather constructive criticism. The suggestions received provide a foundation for future rewriting which they continue to do on their own.

The guidelines included in the outline suggest some techniques to enable the students not only to get started but also to look critically at what they write. The process of writing is actually used as a tool for thinking. In other words, "write first, choose and organize later, then rewrite" becomes the formula and provides the answer to that often heard statement "I don't know where to start."

### **A Method For Approaching Your Essays**

#### A. Free Writing

1. Free writing (10-30 minutes)
2. Extract the main points and list them at the top of another page.
3. Free writing on these points or some of them (10-30 min.)
4. Again list the main topics and add subtopics.

#### B. Preliminary Organization

1. Choose the ideas you will use. Keep in mind:
  - a. desired length
  - b. relative importance of ideas
  - c. specific instructions given on your application
2. Put your ideas into a preliminary sequence.
3. Consider specific examples and/or details (to help you avoid generalizations).

#### C. Writing, Organizing, and Editing

1. Write a draft of the essay; don't worry if you don't follow your planned organizational pattern at this point.
2. Read it out loud to yourself.
  - a. Are you really addressing your audience?
  - b. Would you say it this way to this audience?
  - c. Do your written words reflect your exact, detailed intent?
3. Rewrite.
4. Outline in detail what you have written.
5. Analyze your organization.
  - a. Is the form clear?
  - b. Is your sequence logical?
  - c. Do you have good connections between sentences and paragraphs?
6. Rewrite.

7. Edit. Try to:
  - a. Avoid wordiness, generalizations (use specific examples and details), and clichés, or even words that sound like clichés.
  - b. Watch for overuse of the passive voice ("is going") and verbs of being ("is," "was"). Use active verbs whenever possible ("I thought" as opposed to "it was thought").
  - c. Make sure your grammar and spelling are perfect.
8. Read it out loud again.
  - a. Is it clear to whom you are "speaking"?
  - b. Would you say it this way?
  - c. Do the written words "say" exactly what you want them to? Remember you won't be there to explain what you "really meant."
  - d. Are you being in any way preachy, pompous, condescending or know-it-all?
  - e. Do your sentences flow, one to another?
  - f. Is this essay interesting? Would it keep you awake if you were on the committee?
9. Rewrite and edit it some more.
10. Get a friend to read it and to respond to the questions in section C8 and/or then show it to a pre-law adviser.
11. Final revisions.
12. Type it.
13. Proofread the essay; there should be no errors.
14. Keep a copy of it and of everything you send. Reread the essay before your interview.

## **General Suggestions**

### A. Be aware of your relationship to your audience.

1. Make sure you have a clear picture of your audience. Reread each draft, and pretend that you are a member of the admissions committee.
2. Write in your own voice as a candidate for law school. Make sure it "sounds" like you.

B. Make sure your essay exactly reflects your intent. Remember, you will not be there to translate or explain what "you really meant"; do not expect the committee members to read your mind.

C. Be as specific and detailed as you can. Avoid generalizations and clichés (like the plague)!

D. Think of your background, interests, goals, accomplishments, failures, etc. as part of a process not as static things.

### E. Think of three basic stages in your writing.

1. you in relationship to your audience
2. organization and selection of content
3. details of style and grammar

## Writing an Effective Personal Statement

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### The Role of Style and Tone in the Personal Statement

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#### Writing an Effective Personal Statement

Perhaps the single most often asked question by law school applicants is "what do law schools look for in a personal statement?" The short answer, of course, is that there is no short answer. There are, however, some guidelines and suggestions that I would like to offer which hopefully can give you some framework from which to work.

I realize that the law schools ask for different things in their "essay question". I will be proceeding on the assumption that the question will be similar to the one we use at Georgetown; that is, discuss your strengths and weaknesses.

In any discussion of the personal statement, I begin with two general principles. First, consider your personal statement to be your interview. Second, when you fill out your application surely you must, at some point, say to yourself, I have filled in the blank but I have so much more to say in this area. I would like to elaborate and emphasize certain things but the application itself just does not allow me the opportunity. That, in my view, is precisely the use to which the personal statement should be put.

Enough generalities. An applicant's essay should be about himself/herself. This is as opposed to an essay about theories of law and society and God and how they are all interrelated. It is possible that candidates may have something interesting to say on this topic but the personal statement is not the place for it.

What should they write about themselves? The key, in my view, is to stress their strengths without being obnoxious and deal with their weaknesses without being defensive. Unless applicants deal with their good and bad points up front in their way, we will deal with them in our way. The personal statement gives the applicant the opportunity to take the Admissions Committee by the hand and guide them through his/her application. The big advantage here is that it can be done solely on the applicant's terms. Consequently, if there is some activity, work, or life experience that he/she is very proud of, that should be stressed and expanded on in the personal statement. I realize that the particular activity etc. may be listed somewhere else in the application. However, it is the applicant's responsibility (and advantage) to highlight the strongest parts of the application. One of the names of this game is to separate oneself from the pack.

A note of caution: Be careful in how this is done. Confidence is a fine quality for a future law student and lawyer. From an admissions point of view however, arrogance is something else. The line between the two is fine, but it is crucial that the applicant understand the difference.

Part of our job is to examine closely both the strong points and the weak points. The issue is not whether the weaker parts of the application will be examined. The issue is on whose terms will they be examined. If the applicant deals with the weaknesses (i.e. low LSAT, low GPA, poor semester), he/she can frame the discussion on his/her terms and offer reasonable and informative explanations. (i.e. history of poor performance on standardized tests, highly rigorous courseload, lots of hours spent working or involved in activities, change of major from premed, personal or family tragedy etc.)

I have noticed that some applicants are reluctant to discuss certain aspects of their background, such as history of disadvantage, ethnic status etc. This is a mistake, plain and simple. No one is asking for lengthy stories of heroism in overcoming enormous obstacles. Information of this kind, however, is very valuable to Admissions Committees and in every instance it can only work to the applicant's advantage.

#### Some closing thoughts

First, applicants should be brief. They should say what they have to say and no more. There is no need to ramble on about how they wanted to be a lawyer since age four. There are, no page restrictions, of course. But my experience tells me that two pages are usually sufficient.

Secondly, a large percentage of law school applicants subscribe to the theory that admissions is strictly a numbers game and that most personal statements are never read. Speaking for Georgetown and, assume, most law schools, this is simply not the case. Of course, the numbers are very important in any decision. But we read every personal statement. Applicants should be advised to write their statements with great care. In many cases, they will be the determining factor.

## **The Role of Style and Tone in the Personal Statement**

A conscientious law school admissions officer probably reads at least a thousand personal statements within a period of a few short weeks. Because of the sheer volume of this undertaking, lack of content or poor style can lessen interest in an applicant's statement.

The most common error we see is the attempt to impress. While it is understandable that the candidate wants to make an impression, his/her very eagerness to do so is what most often gets in the way of an honest, truly impressive essay. Some candidates become pretentious, pedantic sometimes nearly ludicrous - in their choice of words and phrases. The following is an actual example:

"I have presented recommendations from legal educational and business leaders in my community that adduce a level of motivation and acumen that you require. All of these qualities are touted as being the primary indicia of a successful law school applicant."

One can, of course, dig through the verbiage to get the sense of the candidate's message, but the candidate would have been wiser to write clearly. The impression the writer leaves is a negative one.

There are other common mistakes such as whining and pleading. Some students use the personal statement to launch a long "explanation" of low LSAT scores. While a paragraph or two may well be appropriate, a page or two is not, and leaves the sad impression that the candidate has little positive in his/her life. What we want to see is a picture of a whole person, not just a test-taker.

Some applicants seem to put very little time into writing their personal statements. A statement such as "I want to go a law school because I would like to be a lawyer and find the study of law fascinating. I have had a keen interest in the law since I was ten years old" will not do. Likewise, but at the opposite extreme, we all get applicants who enclose lengthy term papers or even theses as a "sample of their writing." Perhaps they put time into that piece of writing but usually it has little or nothing to do with law school and is too long for us to read.

How refreshing it is to read an essay which gives us some background on why a person wants to go to law school, for instance here is an excerpt from an essay:

"Shortly after my return from Washington, D.C. in 1977, I was awarded a research fellowship from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The purpose of this project was to develop an inventory of ecologically balanced, marine-based technologies. It was our ultimate goal to provide this information, in the form of technical assistance to the governments of coastal and island nations in the Pacific Basin. During this project, I was given my first glimpse into the complex world of international law. On several occasions I was required to research and analyze provisions of the International Law of the Sea Treaty, conflicting or ill-defined international trade agreements, and complicated aspects of international patent and manufacturing licenses. As a result of this legal research the project was able to create workable models for the technologies in our inventory. My work on this fellowship culminated with several published articles and an invitation to lecture on this subject in Japan."

This concerns the past. Now, what are the hopes or plans for the future? Later in the essay, the applicant wrote:

The preceding paragraphs have illustrated the extensive connection my education and work have had with the law. In retrospect, I believe that I would have been more effective in all of these activities if I had received formal legal training. I am certain that in the years to come, my pursuits will be no less related to the law than they are today. Therefore, I am convinced that law school and admission to the bar are the tools I need.

In sum, because we read so many essays, style should be clear, concise and honest! Elements of Style by Strunk and White is a fine resource book for students with questions on style or who have a tendency to ramble.

Students should ask an adviser to read over the final draft for clarity before typing and submitting the personal statement.

# Tips for Writing a Winning Personal Statement

For many law school applicants, the first challenge in writing the personal statement is getting over that initial stumbling block of figuring out where or how to begin. Since most law schools do not offer formal interviews as part of the application process, consider the personal statement as your interview with the schools. As such, the essay should be about you. It should be about your experiences, your passions, and your ambitions. With this in mind, we have put together an exercise to help you collect your thoughts before you attempt to outline and write the first draft of your essay.

In three to five pages, write out your answers for the following eight questions:

- 1.) Why do I want to go to law school, and what in my past supports that desire?
- 2.) What do I want to study in law school and why?
- 3.) Why am I unique?
- 4.) What do I bring to a law school class?
- 5.) What is my greatest joy/ success and what felt so good about it?
- 6.) What is my greatest adversity and how did I overcome it?
- 7.) Where do I see myself in 5 years?
- 8.) Where do I see myself 10 years after law school?



Now that you've put a few ideas down on paper, it's time to start drafting. Keep in mind these two points:

- 1.) Your finished product should be no more than two pages in length.
- 2.) The tone should be positive, emphasizing strengths and accomplishments.

As you begin to write, be sure to keep these essay-writing basics in mind:

- 1.) Before you begin writing, outline your main points and the order in which you want to present them.
- 2.) Give your essay direction with a clearly defined theme or thesis.
- 3.) Use concrete examples from your life experience to support your thesis and distinguish yourself from other applicants.
- 4.) Write clearly and succinctly.
- 5.) Try to limit your use of "I" to three (3) times per page.
- 6.) End your essay with a conclusion that refers back to the lead and restates your thesis.
- 7.) Proofread and revise your personal statement a minimum of three times. In addition to your own editing, ask someone else to critique your essay for you, but remember that it should be your ideas and your voice.