

SERVICE TO THE STUDENT, THE SCHOOL,
THE PROFESSION, AND THE COMMUNITY



WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT FOR LAW SCHOOL

PHI ALPHA DELTA
LAW FRATERNITY, INTERNATIONAL

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WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT FOR LAW SCHOOL

*Winner, 1996-97 Outstanding Professional Program Award
New York State University, Binghamton Pre-Law Chapter*

Suitable For: small, medium and large chapters

Recommended Program Pair: none

P.A.D. Program Material: How to Write a Personal Statement handouts and sample essays

Recommended Instructor: law school admissions dean; for small chapters: pre-law advisor

Cost: Small — 1) purchase price of overhead transparencies; 2) expense of copying material onto overhead transparencies; 3) expense of copying handouts for seminar participants; and 4) normal publicity costs. Ask your pre-law advisor if he or she can obtain overhead transparencies at no cost for your chapter. In order to obtain assistance with copy charges and other costs, ask the campus career center to sponsor this seminar.

Program Overview: Chapter members learn how to write a personal statement that increases their chance of acceptance to the law school of their choice.

Organization: Request that the Pre-Law Department send your chapter the Personal Statement Seminar Packet (see the cover for contact information). It includes handouts about how to write a personal statement and sample essays for correction on an overhead projector. You must have the program materials before inviting an admissions dean or representative to instruct the seminar, so order ahead. Remember to allow ten working days for the Pre-Law Department to fill the order and one week for mail delivery.

The Pre-Law Department will send you one master of all program materials. Once you have the master, invite a law school admissions dean or representative to instruct this seminar (smaller chapters may prefer to ask their pre-law advisor to be the instructor if attendance is projected to be small; pre-law advisors are also good alternative instructors for chapters who cannot get an admissions representative to teach). When you extend the invitation, give the instructor a copy of the P.A.D. program materials. Ask the instructor if he/she would like to use the sample essays (on an overhead projector) to help teach the students the how to's of personal statement writing.

If the instructor would like to use the P.A.D. materials, copy the sample essays onto transparencies for the instructor. Also make enough copies of the P.A.D. handouts for the students projected to attend the seminar. If the professor has other materials he/she prefers to use, graciously agree.

During the planning stage, ask your chapter's pre-law advisor if he/she would be willing to correct the students' personal statements after the program is over. Also, ask your chapter's pre-law advisor if he/she would be willing to return the personal statements to the students individually, by appointment, so they can discuss the corrections made. Finally, if your campus career center maintains student placement files to assist students with the process of applying to graduate school, ask a career center representative if he/she would be willing to place the final versions of the personal statements in the students' career files.

This is a two-part seminar, scheduled on two separate dates. The law school admissions dean or representative participates on the first date only. During the first seminar, the handouts are distributed and the instructor (i.e., law school admissions dean, representative or pre-law advisor) teaches students how to write a personal statement. The sample essays on transparencies should be provided to the instructor for analysis and correction during this seminar.

After the first seminar, each student writes a personal statement. Students bring their personal statements to the second seminar and exchange them for a personal statement written by another student. Then the students critique each other's essays. After the second seminar the students revise their essays again and then see their pre-law advisor (if prior arrangements have been made to this effect) for a last critique. Students who want the career center to maintain a file for them can turn in the final version of their statement to the chapter secretary who would then turn in all collected personal statements to the campus career center. The chapter might also like to keep a file of personal statements for the future reference of members.

Follow-up: Send thank you letters to the instructor. If the pre-law advisor and the campus career center participated in the program, mail them a thank you letter also.



Phi Alpha Delta

Law Fraternity International

<Name of School> Pre-Law Chapter

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President

<Name Here>
Vice President

<Name Here>
Secretary

<Name Here>
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<Name Here>
Rules

<Name Here>
Alumni

<Name(s) Here>
Banquet

<Name(s) Here>
Ceremony

<Name(s) Here>
Communications

<Name Here>
Dean of Pledges

<Name Here>
Asst. Dean of Pledges

<Name Here>
Fundraising

<Name(s) Here>
History

<Name Here>
Library

<Name Here>
Philanthropy

<Name Here>
Professional

<Name Here>
Social

Dear Members, Pledges and Guests of the Fraternity:

Welcome to the Phi Alpha Delta Professional Program, "How to Write a Personal Statement". Our presenter is <name> of <place>.

PERSONAL STATEMENTS

If you have any future questions for our presenter, <name> can be reached at <e-mail>.

Enclosed within the packet are the following:

1. Some Suggestions about Writing a Personal Statement by Professor John Arthur of New York State University, Binghamton.
2. Two articles: "Writing a Personal Statement" and "Editing For Length." These are taken from Getting Into Law School Today, by Thomas Martinson, J.D.
3. Essays That Worked For Law Schools, edited by Boykin Curry. According to this book, there are eight different types of essays. An explanation of each type along with an example of each is provided.
4. Two sample essays for correction in class on an overhead projector.

Here are some books on personal statements available at your campus career development center or the local public library.

1. Perfect Personal Statements, by Mark Allen Stewart.
 2. Graduate Admissions Essays, by Donald Asher
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Thank you for attending tonight's program. If you have any questions on this packet, you can contact <name, phone number and email>.

All are welcome to any Phi Alpha Delta professional program. Keep an eye out for new programs next semester in the school newspaper, the <name of paper>, and on posted signs.

Some Suggestions About Writing A Personal Statement

By John Arthur

I believe your law school statement is a very important part of your application. Many others will be at or near your grades and scores, which means that this could easily tip the balance in your favor. Especially good or bad personal statements can even outweigh those other factors.

Think of it as your interview. The idea is to show who you are, what you are about as a person - in short, to introduce yourself to the admissions committee. Remember that committee members read hundreds of them; one person, for instance, said he makes it a rule never to read more than twenty at one time. On the other hand, he said, a good one will stay with him throughout the day. I have four specific suggestions.

1. Always remember that you have two objectives. First, this is your one chance to indicate the kind of person you are, so you want to present yourself as a person who is thoughtful, honest, sincere, and serious. Imagine you were reading the statement, made by a person applying to your law school. What would convince you that this person is the sort you would like to get to know better? It's less important that you describe unusual events in your life and try to demonstrate what makes you different from others. The topic can be a relatively minor part of your life; but it must say something that is indicative of the sort of person you are.

2. In addition to showing who you are as a person, your second aim is to demonstrate your writing skills. All lawyers should be able to write well; the essay is your chance to show you can do it. Organization is very important: the essay should have structure and coherence. It should also flow smoothly, and be pleasant to read. Ask of each word and sentence: Why is this here? Is there a better way to put the point? Be sure to vary the length of sentences. Avoid using large, ponderous words; simple, clear, succinct statements are always preferable to wordy, pretentious ones. You should also avoid passive voice. And, finally, be sure to check and double check spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

3. It's generally good, though not by any means essential, that you say something about law; you are, after all, applying to law school. But this should not be the major focus. You might, for example, give an indication of why you're interested in law as a career, or why you want to attend law school. Or you could say something about law as a subject of study: Why are you interested in it? Why is it worth studying?

4. Finally, for some more specific suggestions. Don't say you've always wanted to be a lawyer, unless there's some very interesting explanation of your motives. Also avoid personal problems you've overcome; don't try to turn yourself into a victim. Nor should you claim to be interested in the law because you want to make society or the world better. Each of the above is

common, and will not do anything to distinguish you from all the other personal statements.

Humor is OK, of course, but too much can fall flat or, worse, appear insincere or not serious. On the positive side, you should always have others read what you have written - people who are willing to be frank about the statement's weaknesses as well as strengths. I've seen some very bad statements that, the author told me, were praised by fellow students and parents. I'd also be sure to read it out loud, often that will uncover awkward wording, bad organization, or other problems.

But most importantly, remember this is your chance to introduce yourself. The particular topic you choose is unimportant. So relax - and just be yourself.

GETTING INTO LAW SCHOOL TODAY

by Thomas Martinson, J.D.

Writing The Statement

As we noted above, writing the personal statement is not an easy task nor one that can be executed overnight. You should begin by considering carefully what it is you want to say and then organizing those thoughts into a coherent whole. Only then will you be ready to start writing. Initially, you should write the personal statement without regard to length. Be profligate with your words. Then edit the statement carefully with regard to style, grammar, and length.

Your writing style is, of course, your own and is already well-established, but there are some general points you should keep in mind as you write your personal statement. First, don't adorn the statement with legal words or phrases. Admissions officers with whom we have spoken are very clear on this point. Language such as "pursuant to," "aforementioned," and "party" (to mean person) has no place in a personal statement. An attempt to dress up the statement in "legalese" is not likely to impress an admissions officer. Instead, most seem to regard such attempts as unsophisticated and even pathetic.

Second, you should avoid generally the temptation to dress up the statement with large words in an attempt to sound erudite. Consider some sentences from a personal statement we were asked to review:

I have always maintained a great interest in our jurisprudential system and have always had the propensity to obtain a legal education. However, due to several personal misfortunes in my household, I have not had the opportunity to apply for and attend law school until the present time.

I am convinced my personal and professional background would add immeasurably to the school's diversity and firmly believe that my demonstrated graduate academic successes are much more indicative of my scholastic capabilities than the undergraduate work I completed three years ago. Those successes, in conjunction with my LSAT score and my pertinent work experience, should make me an ideal candidate.

Jurisprudential? Propensity? Personal misfortunes? Household? Scholastic capabilities? Pertinent? The language is strained and makes the writer sound pompous and insincere. You'll fare better if you just express your thoughts directly and in your own words.

Third, avoid the temptation to overstate your case. Again, we refer to the sentences immediately above. This statement asserts that the candidate has always been interested in law. Always? Even before kindergarten? And the statement claims that the applicant is an ideal candidate who would contribute immeasurably to the school. Ideal, as in perfect? And a contribution that can't even be measured?

From "Getting Into Law School" by Thomas Martinson, J.D.

Don't try to defend the writer by arguing that we are nitpicking. Obviously, the writer meant "for a long time" rather than "always" and "strong candidate with an interesting background" rather than "ideal candidate who would contribute immeasurably." But it is a very strange defense of a law school applicant to say that the personal statement doesn't really say what the applicant intended. After all, lawyers are supposed to choose their words carefully. Using "always" to mean "for a long time" and "ideal" and "immeasurably" to mean "strong" and "significantly" suggests sloppy habits of thought, and sloppy thinking is not desirable in a lawyer.

Editing for Length

The initial draft of your personal statement can be as long as you care to make it, but the final version had better be no longer than two double-spaced, typed pages. For most applicants, a well-edited personal statement doesn't even run two full pages.

As you edit for length, you will have to make choices about the content of the statement and decisions about the language used. Regarding content, the editing process will force you to jettison some material. You must consciously ask yourself, "Does this point really carry very much weight?" If the answer is "no," then you should delete it and close up the gap. With regard to language, you must consciously ask yourself, "Do I really need this word?" If the answer is "no," then delete it.

Editing for length is exacting detail work. Consider an example:

My spouse and I have decided to move from New York and relocate to the Los Angeles area. We hold the opinion that California is the region of the country where we want to raise our family and where we both will be able to realize our professional goals and aspirations.

Does this statement really need the following?

"to move from New York and"

"We hold the opinion that"

"the region of the country"

"and aspirations"

Those words can be deleted without sacrificing any of the content of the paragraph:

My spouse and I have decided to relocate to the Los Angeles area. California is where we want to raise our family and where we both will be able to realize our professional goals.

ESSAYS THAT WORKED FOR LAW SCHOOL

Edited by Boykin Curry

Injustice Witnessed: Essays About Crimes of All Sorts

In a utopian world, there would be no need for law - or lawyers. The law student's true *raison d'être* is the existence of injustice. The desire to fix that is the purest of motivations for the aspiring lawyer.

You may see injustice in a more abstract, political form, as one person did, or you may even play a role yourself, as another found himself doing. These pieces are especially powerful, because rather than talking with pretentious adjectives about motivations, they recreate scenes that thrust the reader into their experience.

In writing an essay like these, you can demonstrate your sensitivity to the world's imperfections and your sympathy to troubles that may not be your own. You show that you can be trusted to treat your law degree - and the knowledge it represents - as more than a money machine.

Essay by: Author Unknown

When I was twelve years old, I wanted to be the first woman president of the United States. Throughout high school, I prepared for this vocation; majoring in political science in college was an easy choice. Much to my surprise, though, political science led me to change my plans and abandon the race for the White House.

Elective office cannot be part of the American dream for everyone. Expensive political technologies such as media advertising and consulting make large campaign coffers necessary for competitive candidates. Moreover, because of money's role in elections, contributors have special access to politics and can exercise disproportionate influence in the decision-making process.

Summer experiences verified these conclusions. While an intern at Common Cause, a citizens lobby group specializing in campaign finance, I saw that political action committees and wealthy contributors play a large role in the decision-making process. Subsequent internships with Senators John Heinz, the chairman of the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, and Arlen Specter, a Republican incumbent seeking reelection in 1986, evidenced how legislators frequently plan their strategies in an effort to appease moneyed interests.

Running for office has lost its appeal. Rather than destroying my dreams, though, disillusionment has pointed me in a new direction and has increased my desire to work towards electoral reform. Law school may tarnish more of my golden ideals. However, I have learned to look beyond my disappointments and look forward to the challenges that accompany them.

From "Essays That Worked For Law Schools" Edited by Boykin Curry

Jugglers: Essays About Applicants With Colorful Backgrounds

The variety of scenarios, cases, decisions, people, and ideas lawyers encounter attracts many students to the profession. Most law schools, meanwhile, are looking for a body of diverse students that can stimulate each other and bring a variety of perspectives and experiences to the school.

One successful angle for an essay, then, is to show how much a Renaissance person you are. “A diverse class is a better class,” one Dean told us. If I could have the perfect class, the only thing I can say for sure is that it would have 375 very different people.”

Discussing how all of your activities, skills, and accomplishments fit together can show your work ethic, your versatility, and your passion. But no one wants to read a resume. Explain how, for example, your love of music and your Haitian background make you a more vivid, sensitive, driven, and/or exciting person. Interesting and telling detail is the key to effective writing. Show and explain - don't just talk.

One person describes how teaching, day care, and music have honed his business and legal skills. His resume - which might seem flaky or undirected to a high-powered lawyer - is revealed to be an excellent preparation for law school.

He succeeds because he challenges the reader to think about familiar subjects in a new way and because he supports his assertions with concrete examples that are interesting and amusing.

Essay by: Author Unknown

A career in law is often portrayed by the media as glamorous; it is viewed as prestigious, and financially rewarding. As a prospective law student, these items appeal to me; but I also realize that a legal career will involve strenuous pressures, exacting challenges, unrelenting hard work, and careful attention to detail.

The interests and talents that I have are diverse, and this diversity will be an advantage for me in law school as well as in a legal career. My interests and achievements, both academic and personal, are well balanced. My college major, Mathematics is a discipline requiring skills in logic and analysis that will be invaluable in my study of law. My minor was in English with emphases in composition, research, and communications. The excellent grades I have earned in mathematics and English reflect my ability to think clearly and logically as well as my proficiency in communicating those thoughts effectively. I have also excelled in all other academic areas outside my major fields of study that portend an aptitude for success in law, such as in public speaking or debate. Furthermore, my personal experiences reflect a diversity of interests and strengths. Through active involvement in church ministries and varied work experiences, I have had the opportunity to deal with people from all backgrounds. This involvement has helped me to further develop a good rapport with people and a healthy social consciousness. A career in law would be ideal for allowing me to use and develop all of these talents, interests, and experiences.

From “Essays That Worked For Law Schools” Edited by Boykin Curry

I look forward to the exciting challenges a career in law will offer. A highly self-motivated, goal-oriented hard worker, I am very competitive by nature, but also strive for quality and excellence when working independently or at a team effort. With a strong personal commitment to integrity, I make every effort to achieve and excel in even the most stressful circumstances and environments.

Because of my diversity of interests and abilities, and my ethics of hard work and integrity, I believe I would be an outstanding student at Indiana and a successful attorney. In all I do, I strive for excellence; and to be accepted by Indiana University

School of Law, with its history of excellence, would be an honor.

Excuses, Excuses: Essays That Explain an Aberration

An essay that admissions people see often too often - is the one about why I did poorly on the LSAT” or “I am an overachiever even though my grades don’t show it.” What may seem like a legitimate explanation to you usually comes across as a shiny excuse for poor performance to the reader.

“Apologizing,” said one officer, “is invariably uninformative. If you were so active in extracurriculars that you couldn’t study, we will see that elsewhere on the application. And telling us that you are a ‘bad tester’ is just a throwaway. We know the LSATs aren’t perfect, and we factor that in. But what are applicants expecting when they write, ‘I really am quite intelligent; I just test poorly?’ That we will knock their score up a few points to compensate? I mean, if they wanted to waste the space, every applicant with a score from 12 to 47 could say that they are ‘smarter than the test indicates.’”

Generally, the personal statement is the wrong place to apologize. There are so many important things to discuss about yourself that to squander the small space - or even part of it - shortchanges your own story and irritates admissions people.

If you do have some objective and new explanation for an aberration in grades, LSATs, or discipline record, some officers suggested that you attach an addendum to your application: “An apology is always superfluous, but if you have a real justification for some lapse, then by all means write it down and send it in. If you don’t mention it, then I guarantee that an admissions committee will think the worst if left to its own devices.”

If you must make an excuse, make it short and sweet. Don’t whine. Don’t blame anyone else. Just get the facts out and be sure that what you say really holds up. The following essay is a perfect example.

Essay by: Author Unknown

Committee Members:

In order that an accurate scrutinization of my application can be made, I sincerely feel that additional, pertinent information is necessary. I hope this brief description of some of the extremities that have occurred in my background can be of some assistance in your evaluation.

When I was seven years old, my parents were irrevocably divorced. At such an impressionable age, the divorce had a deadening and devastating effect because my father had been my only support system. As the years progressed, I learned of the excruciating, emotional and financial burden it placed on my mother. Being the oldest of four children, there was an ingrown obligation in me to aid my mother in whatever way possible. Four years later in an effort to provide supplemental income to the household, I acquired a paper route. I maintained a paper route during my entire high school career. In addition, I also worked in various part-time capacities at restaurants, car washes and janitorial services. The employment was beneficial to the household, but it totally eliminated my participation in Glee Club, athletics and other high school extracurricular activities. At the conclusion of my senior year, I was awarded a scholarship from the city newspaper.

For the duration of my collegiate career, my education and the financial stability of my household were contingent on my employment endeavors. My mother had become dependent on me and the monetary contributions I provided became a propriety. More times than not, there was a propensity to let employment and financial circumstances dictate the measure of my individual academic success. One such occasion was the fall semester of 1972. My mother required major surgery and even though insurance covered most of the medical bills, other vital expenses would have been neglected during her recuperation. These circumstances necessitated that I work a full-time job in addition to being a full-time student with work-study employment. Such a stringent schedule proved to be academically detrimental that semester. On several other occasions, it was essential that I maintain full-time employment. Even though the remainder of my career was just as strenuous it was beneficial because it showed the value of time management while serving to foster and cultivate individual perseverance. I received a Bachelor of Arts degree on May 15, 1977.

I was granted admission into a graduate program in 1978. No longer saddled with financial burdens, I was able to excel, complete all requirements and graduate one semester ahead of schedule.

In Honor Of Mario Cuomo: Contemplative Essays

The serious, philosophical “thought essay” is perhaps the most difficult to write. The best examples demonstrate an intellectually curious and disciplined mind, but even the best can be hard to read. Frequently, the work loses its impact because students digress from the original point and allow their logic to become muddled by “\$10 words” and complicated strings of sentences.

Most students get too abstract when they discuss philosophical concepts. When you write about abstract ideas, link the idea to a tangible example with which the reader can identify. For example, you might use the death of a friend as a starting point for a discussion of religious philosophy. Remember, too, that admissions officers are pressed for time. They don’t have all day to kick back and mull over your deep, brilliant insights.

Emily Nozick, for instance, sticks to eating habits and animals - things familiar to everyone - to illustrate how she has developed her philosophy and reconciled emotion with intellect.

Notice that she begins with a line calculated to perplex the reader without confusing him. After reading her first sentence, you’re not sure what she’s talking about, but you want to keep reading. She piques your interest, and reading her essay becomes a pleasure, not a chore.

What if Nozick had written a more typical, “safe” essay on the same topic? Her first line might read something like this: “Throughout the history of mankind, the intellect and the emotion, two characteristics which uniquely define the human in the animal world, have been locked in conflict...”

Want to read more?

Interestingly, when we asked students to submit essays to us; a high number were “thought essays, and almost all were tough to read. But when admissions officers sent us their favorite essays, only a few were philosophical. After all, if you were forced to read 300 essays a day, would you rather read Immanuel Kant or Mark Twain?

We don’t want to scare you, though. The “thought essay” can be both interesting and effective. But write clearly and make sure that your ideas follow in a fluid manner. Don’t make assumptions about the reader’s knowledge, and be careful not to make mental leaps that leave the reader with brain cramps.

At the same time, you cannot risk sounding pedantic or unsophisticated. Lecturing on the law - before you have studied it is likely to bore and irritate the reader. No matter how great your contributions will be someday, it is far safer - and more revealing - to discuss your vision than your knowledge.

Essay by: Emily Nozick

The material of my shoes has always been a point of discomfort for me, and the subject has arisen a remarkable number of times in conversation. It is not that my shoes are made of anything unusual, they are made of leather, but when I claim to be a vegetarian on moral grounds, one of the first attacks is always aimed at my feet.

I am never quite sure how to respond to this accusation of hypocrisy and I have fallen back on the idea that I am “doing what I can,” although I do not hold my head high when I give this retort. At the same time, however, I am somewhat taken aback by their response. It seems that, although I have never voiced it as anything other than a personal choice, people are automatically defensive around vegetarians, and seek either to explain their own eating habits (“I only eat red meat twice a week”) or to attack mine (“I’ve heard that plants scream when you cut them”). Why does vegetarianism elicit such a probing series of questions about exactly what you eat, what your grounds are, and how you justify other areas of your life? Does punching a hole in my behavior enable others to eat their hamburger in peace? Inconsistency in practice, it seems, is the downfall of any theory.

Nonetheless, the questioning has forced me to examine my views, and to reevaluate my original reasons for holding them. I first made up my mind to stop eating meat, chicken, and fish at our Thanksgiving table when I was three. No elaborately reasoned theory contributed to this decision; no pro-con arguments were weighed in my mind. I reacted from pure emotion. I had just seen a live turkey, who was looking perfectly content with his life, and here was an almost unrecognizable turkey, inert on the table. It just did not seem fair. But while my “this turkey wanted to live” statement adequately captured the line of reasoning of a three year old, I no longer feel comfortable maintaining a toddler’s view of the world. At 20 years old, I feel pressured, both from others and from myself, to present a perfectly coherent picture of my sympathy for animals.

Either the belief must encompass my practices of wearing leather and killing cockroaches in the bathroom, or my practices must change.

Unfortunately, a flawless system of action is not easy to obtain. Either the theory has gaping holes, or the practice is just too strenuous and demanding. But isn’t remaining faithful to a spotted theory intellectually dishonest? How can inconsistency in action be explained?

With vegetarianism, I have to admit that in addition to the issue of inconvenience, my actions reveal the triumph of emotions over intellect. I do what I feel driven to do, and I ignore what I am ambivalent towards. I feel a “turn of the stomach” at the thought of eating meat, and not at the idea, or the action, of wearing leather. I certainly do not feel repulsion at killing a cockroach, in fact, I am disgusted by the idea of letting it roam free. All of my life I have acted on this one feeling of not wanting to eat animals and I have not worried about the actions surrounding it. Perhaps it is artificial to now start molding some all-encompassing theory out of pure emotion. For even if I succeed in creating a view to fit my practices or vice-versa, feelings of apathy or disgust have the first and final vote in this issue for me.

This is interesting, because in so many aspects of my life I hold up reason as supreme. I myself, like those who criticize me, have always had contempt for hypocrisy, or even an appeal to psychology over intellect. Such practices seemed weak. And here I am falling into the trap of irrationality of the very issue which, on the surface, stands on a pure intellectual decision. But to be honest, although it may be weak, I really think that emotion ultimately motivates my choice. After 17 years of being a vegetarian, and of thinking that it is “right”, for whatever reasons, it is a part of me. I am comfortable with this belief and no amount of prodding can shake me from the emotion. I guess that while intellect grows between the ages of 3 and 20, emotions stay pretty much the same.

To Have What It Takes: Essays About Character

Law school - and the profession in general - is demanding. No admissions officer wants to admit students who were glitzed by LA Law. Law school means spending hours through the night pouring over obscure cases written in some of the most colorless prose since your tenth-grade algebra text. It is not glamorous. It is rarely fun. It takes hard work, self-discipline, and a high tolerance for boredom and exhaustion to become a great lawyer.

If you have endured before, and done so with humor and good nature, by all means tell your story. Don't be a martyr, though. Whining complaints about all your hardships are tiresome. The reader will think: If it's so bad, why doesn't he pursue something less demanding? Miserable students - even hard-working, miserable students - bring down everyone else. No professor wants a classroom full of bright but depressed legal minds.

High spirits, on the other hand, are infectious. In Thomas Kelly's essay, the playful tone makes you think he really enjoys living in the squalor of the West African bush. If he can laugh about his fly-infested food and the battle to acquire it, a long night of study or a stressful trial will be a cakewalk to him.

Essay by: Thomas A. Kelly, III

For two years I have been a Peace Corps volunteer in the Republic of Niger in West Africa. I live in a grass hut in a tiny village called Fandou-Berri, sixty-five kilometers from the nearest city. I subsist primarily on a diet of rice, millet paste and leaf sauce. Once a week I travel twenty kilometers to the village of Hamdallaye where I can buy goat meat. Each time I walk away from the Hamdallaye market, having bargained for a fair chunk of meat, I think of Mrs. H, an attorney at Paul, known in the office as the Velvet Steamroller. It was said that she could bargain the shirt off your back and make you believe that you had gotten the better of the deal. When I was a paralegal, I admired her technique. Now I wish I she could see me deal with the butchers in Hamdallaye.

Because there are no scales in the West African bush, meat is sold by the pile. Normally, an amount of money is stated in advance, then the size of the pile is haggled over. When buying meat in Hamdallaye the size of the pile depends on a confluence of factors. Is the butcher working alone, or does he have to demonstrate his business acumen to his fellow butchers by slighting the foreigner? Is he in a good or even charitable mood? This will determine whether he will follow the practice of throwing one last large chunk on the pile after the bargain has been struck - the butcher's version of the baker's dozen. I have learned to judge the butcher's expressions as I approach the meat section of the market, then isolate a sympathetic looking one.

Is the buyer in the mood to haggle? This can work two ways. Some days the best strategy is to stare expressionlessly at the pile as it mounts, guilting the butcher into being fair. Other days, particularly if there is a crowd for the butcher to play to, one

From "Essays That Worked For Law Schools" Edited by Boykin Curry

must haggle aggressively for the entire second half of the pile. If the buyer's approach does not correspond to the butcher's mood and to the prevailing conditions, he is certain to come away the loser.

The object itself often looks decidedly not worth the argument. The various body parts, including gaping eyeballs and oozing entrails lie on the table intermixed with the choice cuts of meat. There is no Styrofoam to mask the reality of what happened to that goat just minutes before. So many flies swarm on the meat that the haggling must be one in a raised voice so that both parties can hear over the buzzing.

The butcher closes the deal by reaching for his equivalent of wax paper - a U.S.A.I.D. cement sack. He tears off a piece, smacks it, which sends a cloud of cement dust into the air, then wraps up the portion of goat meat for transport. The transaction is complete.

If there is, in the curriculum of the law school I attend, a course in bargaining, perhaps Mrs. H and I can teach it together.

Turning Points: Essays About Important Changes

How do you use your experiences to change and grow? The “turning point” essay can show how thoughtful, sensitive and responsive you are, and writing it may give you even more insight.

Unlike Paul on the road to Damascus, one incident rarely changes a person’s life. Trying to persuade the reader that a single event suddenly revolutionized your perspective on Life, the Universe, and Everything is likely to sound (and be) contrived rather than profound. Nevertheless, discussing a specific experience can be a great way to express a change or an idea that has developed over time.

The essay by James Silk is especially powerful. His final line - added, it seems, almost casually - jolts the complacent reader. Even if you disagree with him, his essay shows an impressive understanding of issues, emotions and the perspective on both sides.

Steve Peikin prods the admissions officer with a concluding waiver. Who knows what will happen to Peikin’s fragile liberalism without the firm molding of this professors?

If you are going to write about a topic that has been pondered by great minds through the ages, be sure you are thinking in a unique way.

The “turning point” essay demonstrates that you are not obstinate and that you are strong enough to reveal your past ignorance - both admirable traits in a would-be lawyer.

Essay by: Steven R. Peikin “How Can You Defend Those People?”

It is appropriate that James Kunen used this question to title his book about his experiences as an attorney for the Public Defender Service. During my summer as a Yale P.N.S. Fellow, many people posed the same question to me, and I found myself searching for the answer as well.

I began work at the Public Defender Service feeling uncertain and apprehensive. As an investigator and case assistant for an attorney in the trial division, I was to direct my energies toward the defense of clients charged with serious and violent felony crimes. Our clients might be ex-convicts or drug abusers. On “the other side” stood the U.S. Attorney whose clients were justice, order, and the protection of society. I was not confident that I was on the side of right.

As the summer progressed, however, I witnessed the steady decrease of my uncertainty. My change in attitude reveals some important lessons learned. One of these lessons is that most people, as I did, foster a stereotypical image of “those people.” The clients with whom I worked were not all ex-convicts or drug addicts. Nor, as many misconceive, were all of “those people” guilty of the crimes of which they were accused. Certainly many of our clients were guilty, but their guilt in no way precluded their right to the best possible representation. The only commonality which I could observe in our clients was an inability to pay for their own defense.

From “Essays That Worked For Law Schools” Edited by Boykin Curry

Anyone working in criminal justice must observe that the system is inherently weighted against poor people. If lawyers are valued by how much money they receive for their services, then poor people are most likely to receive the lowest quality legal representation. The apprehensions I had about defending “those people” quickly fell before the realization that their poverty causes them to be treated as inferiors before the law. Working to help the small actor assert his or her equality before a large and powerful system seems like a worthwhile service.

My greatest uncertainty about working for P.N.S. stemmed from a preconception that defense attorneys work against the service of justice to let the guilty go unpunished. My conscience was eased by my observation that this is largely untrue. For the most part, the guilty are convicted when the evidence weighs against them. Further, our system of jurisprudence assures that the conviction of the innocent is extremely rare. But does this reality mean that justice prevails? In answering this question, James Kunen makes a very astute, if sobering, observation. He says that by the time a criminal case gets to court, almost all of the injustice has already occurred. “The victim has already been victimized: the defendant, more often than not, has been subjected to every kind of abuse from inadequate prenatal care to exclusion from the work force.” In such a framework, how can any court claim to administer ultimate justice?

During my time at P.N.S. I became extremely sympathetic to our clientele. The murder case that I worked on for most of the summer resulted in an acquittal, and I was extremely proud to have part of the defense team. Nevertheless, there are aspects of criminal defense which still trouble me. Removed from the environment of P.N.S., many of my doubts about the role of defense attorney return. I anticipate that my legal education will enable me to consider it in a more enlightened perspective.

So You Want To Be a Lawyer: Essays About Entering the Legal Profession

Why should the resources of a great law school be devoted to you? Why should you get the thick packet next March while 10,000 other applicants get only a thin letter?

One way to convince admissions officers that you do deserve a space at their school is to discuss why you want to be there in the first place. People choose to become lawyers for many reasons. If your reason is interesting and revealing of your character, it might make a great essay.

The next essay concerns idealistic visions. The writer claims that a law degree might empower them to give life to their dreams of better justice, clean sports, social morality, or better education.

But weary admissions officers can get cynical about proclamations of social conscience (after all, does anyone support worse justice or unfair sports?), so be sure to support your assertions with concrete actions or anecdotes. Sensitivity to the actions of others can be more powerful than a list of your own great deeds. The writer of this next essay is driven by his own restlessness - the search for meaning or stimulation. Such a motivation can be compelling, but take care not to grow too ponderous. Few admissions directors want to give a scarce opening to someone who is exploring without purpose and direction. "If an applicant wants to search himself," one told us, "he should take a year off and travel or something. Law school is demanding, and if students are confused about why they're there, problems arise. Only occasionally will intellectual curiosity itself be enough to warrant admission."

Whether you agree with that policy or not, you must be sensitive to a school's perspective. Never just say you are "just looking." State your purpose in positive terms: "I want a broad legal training that will allow me to enter many new fields." If you're not sure why you're going to law school, avoid the subject. Better yet, perhaps, reconsider your entire application.

Essay by: Thomas William Andrews

As I have grown older, the Constitution of the United States of America had become, for me, a sort of secular religious document. At the risk of sounding ridiculous, some people dream of joining the clergy, I dream of joining the bar. Some people feel drawn to Mecca or the Wailing Wall, I was drawn to visit Washington, D.C. and the glass-encased Constitution.

The Constitution is one of the things in this world that I choose to use to give definition to my life. I once tried to memorize it, but now I simply strive to understand it. I bought a facsimile of the Constitution in the gift shop of the building where George Washington was sworn in as our first President. It hangs on my wall as in other homes one might find a crucifix or Menorah on the mantel.

I have heard people criticize the number of lawyers in the United States. The standard, simplistic comparison used is the ratio of lawyers to engineers in both America and Japan. While it is true that the United States has far more lawyers than

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any other society on the planet Earth, it seems also evident that we enjoy more justice than any other society on this planet.

We need more people who know the law, and who push for justice, and who are uncompromising toward our freedom and rights. I feel there is always room for one more good lawyer. I want to be one of the people in our society trying to make the Constitution work, exercising our rights, and keeping freedom a strong and viable force.

Be True To Your School: Essays About Why You and the School Are Well-Matched

An admissions officer sent us an essay she liked, and she included a personal note. “The fact that this essay is tailored to our school and mentions me by name,” read part of her letter, “is unimportant and unnecessary.”

Maybe.

Any indication that you have looked carefully at the schools you want to attend can make you seem more mature. You want to persuade the admissions officer that you would be a good fit with the school. But be careful. Don’t spoil your observations with effusive language and gratuitous praise.

“We get a lot of applicants writing, ‘Your school has an internationally renowned reputation,’” on admissions officer said, “and you know they wrote the same thing to 12 other schools.”

Even if you honestly believe that a school has “an exciting and diverse student body, brilliant professors, and an excellent program of study,” telling them this says nothing about you.

Every law school has some fine aspects, and a candidate who has researched the school can speak to them. Doing so could convince the admissions officer to let you in - or reject you. If you cannot substantiate your argument that you “fit” the school well, the fit will be contrived, and the admissions officer will spot it a mile away.

Yale Law School is known for its politically active, often left-wing students and faculty, and an essay about your compassion for the oppressed might be well-received there. But if your history of activism consists of ringing doorbells for Ronald Reagan one weekend in 1984, you’re not going to need directions to New Haven.

The law schools at the University of Chicago and the University of Michigan are regarded as rather traditional, where hard work may count for more than political activism. Telling Dean Smith in Ann Arbor that you are “inspired by the demanding workload at Michigan” will fall flat if your grades are mediocre.

So consider a wide range of law schools, and if you do see a match, then by all means exploit it. But don’t try to play on the admissions officers’ egos or stupidity. They’ve seen it all before - many, many times.

Essay by: Jean Skelton Fraser

My grandfather, dean of the Minnesota Law School and alumnus of Harvard Law, had one thing to say about Yale Law School. “If you want to learn sociology,” he said, “go to Yale. If you want to learn law, go somewhere else.”

Though my grandfather may turn over in his grave, Yale is my first choice. As my parents have shown, an understanding of our legal system is of great value in effecting social change. I believe that my father’s legal training has made him a more responsible and effective congressman and mayor. For example, he vetoed an anti-pornography ordinance whose goals he agreed with because it infringed upon the right to free speech. My mother, who has worked in and out of government, also stresses the importance of change within the context of existing institutions. Having been caught in Uganda in the recent coup, she is only too aware of the fragility of our defenses against rule by violence.

Only fair law justly applied keeps us from anarchy. Law is the expression of a complex interaction between our cultural values and the structure of our society. Because I want to change the attitudes and the structure, I need to understand our legal system, not just the law codes. What fascinates me is the process as well as the end product. At Yale I want to learn how our laws have been developed and applied in the past to be more effective at changing them in the future.

SAMPLE ESSAYS FOR YOUR CORRECTION

Sample Essay #1

The desire to study law I did not acquire instantaneously. An undergraduate concentration in “Law and Society” was chosen to satisfy my interests. However the course work only helped build the foundation on which could more truly state that I wanted to pursue a legal education. That course study did not quell my interests and I realize it was not designed to satiate an interest in law, but rather to fuel it. The spark occurred years before.

In my family there was a constant awareness of the criminal justice system. My father, uncles, and great uncle, and most of their friends were policemen. Of course, not all conversation revolved around criminality, but there was an underlying and pervasive precept used to determine the legality and morality of any personal or public decisions of the time. A logical process was employed to determine what was “right.” This process of determining what laws mean and the repercussions was my spark. To understand that laws are created for the good of all and not as an annoyance to daily living was firmly ingrained in me. That laws were utilized as intended was important, that they were not abused, interpreted and twisted to circumnavigate their original intent was of utmost concern. At the same time, it was conveyed to me that law was not and should not be a dead and stagnant entity, but a living tool that could be altered, defined, and utilized better without corrupting its pristine intent.

It was this manifestation of law in relation to life that inspired my choice of undergraduate studies. At Binghamton I took five courses that were particularly concerned with philosophical and or ethical aspects of law. These studies intensified a desire to know that legal theory and doctrine were synthesized with moral and ethical behavior. My aspiration for a legal education came from this desire. I do not presume to know what great legal scholars have debated throughout the centuries, but I would like to be able to participate in the debate with a solid knowledge and understanding of the principles involved, I want a chance to study hard enough to keep a steadfast regard for the law so that I will have a place to stand my ground and perhaps have something unique to contribute.

Sample Essay #2

The summer following my freshman year in college I interned at the County District Attorney's Office. As one of three undergraduates in an intern class of approximately thirty law students, and also as the youngest by far, I was worried that I might be under-qualified for my position. I determined that I should do my best to be a professional intern. I would be quick, helpful, and diligent. It did not occur to me that I would also have to be an adult.

I live in a town where people do not get killed by others. Some get too old, some kill themselves, but murder is generally a foreign notion. Perhaps this contributed to the commotion that ensued when Mr. Black was killed. This commotion was compounded though, without a doubt, because he had also been everyone's science teacher in high school. It is a widely held belief that teachers don't even have first names, let alone scandalous deaths.

Mr. Black's murder would bring an end to that groundless belief. He was killed while I was at school, and when I returned home to begin my internship, I learned that his death had been the result of a financial transaction with a male prostitute gone awry. I was horrified by his death, but at the same time it didn't seem real. I could remember him very clearly tinkering with his science things, looking fierce and teacher-like, looking alive.

The internship began, and in the excitement, Mr. Black's murder left my mind entirely. Days cramped with business attire, hearings, witness follow ups, and interviews ensued. Second seating prosecutors through voir dices and trials gave me an indispensable perspective on the criminal justice system. I saw the frenzy commanded by over scheduled court dockets, and the struggle within individual prosecutors as they tried to maintain a balance between hurrying it up and getting it right.

Eight weeks into the internship I saw what I will never forget. My assignment at the time was with the prosecutors handling the felony courts. One of the interns told me there was a murder trial going on, and that the defendant had killed some teacher. I raced to the courtroom. It had to be Mr. Black's case. It was.

There were four people in the courtroom. The defendant was sitting at the defense table. He must have heard me come in because he turned and looked. I wasn't angry. Instead, I was amazed, because I realized that he was looking at someone who hadn't existed eight weeks before. He was looking at an adult, and the suit had nothing to do with it.

Mr. Black had been a teacher, and I will forever remember him from the perspective of a child, but in the courtroom that day, I personified all that I had taken on in joining the prosecutor's office, even for the summer. I had taken on the awesome responsibility of being a part of an office, of a system, that controls people's lives. In the same way that Mr. Black had once appeared to me so frightening, as a student behind my little desk, so I would have appeared to his murderer, as he sat behind his meager defense, if he had known that I was with the prosecution.

My internship and Mr. Black's death taught me together what neither could have alone. I am not the child Mr. Black terrified nor the adult seen by his killer, but am instead both and neither; in a word, a combination. I am an individual who is, with ever growing clarity, continually able to recognize and accept responsibility, for

myself, for society, and for the law that governs it. This quality is essential for anyone aspiring to play a meaningful role in the criminal justice system. I aspire to that role.