

Writing Your Personal Statement for Law School

A personal statement for law school is different than a statement of purpose for other graduate programs. While essays for other graduate programs often ask you to focus on your past academic experiences and how they will relate to your future in their program, law schools view the personal statement as an **opportunity to demonstrate your personality and unique aspects of your character**.

However, the law school personal statement is a contested genre due to the lack of universal guidelines. While there is a wealth of advice on law school websites as well as from third party sources, some of it can be contradictory. Below are some general tips for writing your personal statement.

1. Think About Your Audience

Before you begin drafting your personal statement, think about who your audience will be. While the admissions committee for each law school is slightly different, they all have a few things in common.

1. The committee is made up of faculty and staff, many of whom have a J.D. themselves. Keep in mind that they are familiar with the field and also with the qualities necessary for success. Avoid generalizations about law, explanations about what the field requires, or uninformed use of legal language.
2. The committee sees hundreds, if not thousands, of applications each year and does not have a lot of time to devote to each applicant. With that in mind, you want your statement to stand out, but also not cause the reader unnecessary work. Thus, be sure to adhere to the school's requirements and keep your statement focused.

2. Find an Angle

The committee wants to know something about you beyond your resume: find your "angle." In other words: identify something unique, genuine and memorable about you and use that "angle" to showcase your personality. This can be different for each student, but most students use an experience that showcases a particular character trait and/or viewpoint, such as a significant hobby or pastime, a personal injury and recovery, or a meaningful volunteer, internship, or other personal experience. Use your "angle" to showcase a unique aspect of your character as a potential student and lawyer.

3. Show; Don't Tell

The statement should tell a story and lead readers to a clear conclusion by using concrete examples to illustrate your main points. As you give examples, be sure to show your reader your point, not just tell them. Try focusing on smaller narratives, rather than broad, abstract ideas, to allow enough space for adequate detail. Be sure to give all the necessary and relevant information the committee will need to understand the situation you are describing and what you want them to learn from it. See the example essay for an illustration of how to use description in your examples to show your character traits.

4. Concentrate on Your Opening and Closing Paragraphs

Because your audience must read quickly, your opening and closing paragraphs can have the most impact on your reader and therefore should be a top priority.

1. A convincing or intriguing opening paragraph can increase the committee's interest in your statement and make your application more memorable. While most students choose to use an anecdote or narrative, you can adapt the approach to match your writing style as long as it continues to support a main idea. Your illustration of your main idea can come in the form of a quotation, a detailed description of an event, or a declarative statement about your experiences, among many others.

2. In addition to your introduction, your conclusion should also be a high priority because your essay should move forward to a point. Remember that the conclusion of your statement may be the last thing a committee will read about you. A strong closing paragraph should reinforce your overall message and leave the readers with a clear impression of who you are as an applicant.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Should I talk about why I want to go to law school or the practice of law?

Advice on this is mixed. While some sources tell students to avoid law altogether, others recommend addressing the program you are applying to. One approach is to address your desire to attend law school in the last paragraph of your essay by applying the qualities or experiences you have discussed to this next step. Ask your advisor which approach is appropriate for you.

If you do choose to address law school directly, be careful not to use jargon that could make you seem naïve or uninformed to your audience – after all, the committee is made up of lawyers.

2. Should I talk about the specific program?

While other graduate school statements may ask students to highlight the specific qualities of the program, law schools generally do not ask you to discuss their specific program in a personal statement. Instead many law schools ask for additional, often optional, essays about why you are interested in the specific program. However, you can still subtly tailor your personal statement by focusing your “angle” on the strengths and values of the program. As you will see, the example essay more explicitly addresses the specific law school; however, this is not mandatory because such arguments may be better addressed in an additional, optional essay.

3. Should I address inconsistencies, blemishes on my record, etc.?

The personal statement is not the place to address any academic weaknesses or other issues with your application. Most law schools offer an optional addendum or other essay for you to address these sorts of issues. The personal statement should be a positive document aimed at conveying your personality, character, and passion to the committee. Therefore, negative issues, such as a low GPA or a poor LSAT score, should not appear in your personal statement – unless it is part of a larger narrative with a positive theme (such as overcoming an greater obstacle).

Annotated Example
(Adapted from the University of Chicago Law School
Admissions Website)

This essay uses an experience with Division I college football to illustrate dedication, work ethic, and strength of character. Regardless of what your chosen topic is, when reading the example, you should pay close attention to the opening and closing paragraphs, the development of the “angle,” and the descriptions of the examples.

Engaging, descriptive opening without direct tie to law school

The turning point of my college football career came early in my third year. At the end of the second practice of the season, in ninety-five-degree heat, our head coach decided to condition the entire team. Sharp excruciating pain shot down my legs as he summoned us repeatedly to the line to run wind sprints. I collapsed as I turned the corner on the final sprint. Muscle spasms spread throughout my body, and I briefly passed out. Severely dehydrated, I was rushed to the hospital and quickly given more than three liters of fluids intravenously. As I rested in a hospital recovery room, I realized my collapse on the field symbolized broader frustrations I felt playing college football.

Presents his angle: overcoming challenges in college football

Signals change and development of character

I was mentally and physically defeated. In South Dakota, I was a dominant football player in high school, but at the Division I level my talent was less conspicuous. In my first three years, I was convinced that obsessively training my body to run faster and be stronger would earn me a starting position. The conditioning drill that afternoon revealed the futility of my approach. I had thrust my energies into becoming a player I could never be. As a result, I lost confidence in my identity.

Character traits relevant to the story and law school

I considered other aspects of my life where my intellect, work ethic, and determination had produced positive results. I chose to study economics and English because processing abstract concepts and ideas in diverse disciplines was intuitively rewarding. Despite the exhaustion of studying late into the night after grueling football practices, I developed an affinity for academia that culminated in two undergraduate research projects in economics. Gathering data, reviewing previous literature, and ultimately offering my own contribution to economic knowledge was exhilarating.

Demonstrates key traits with rich description; shows instead of telling

Explicit reference to law school; shows relevance

Indeed, undergraduate research affirmed my desire to attend law school, where I could more thoroughly satisfy my intellectual curiosity. In English classes, I enjoyed writing critically about literary works while adding my own voice to academic discussions. My efforts generated high marks and praise from professors, but this success made my disappointment with football more pronounced.

The challenge of collegiate athletics felt insurmountable. However, I reminded myself that at the Division I level I was able to compete with and against some of the best players in the country. While I might never start a game, the opportunity to discover and test my abilities had initially compelled me to choose a Division I football program. After the hospital visit, my football position coach – sensing my mounting frustrations –

offered some advice. Instead of devoting my energies almost exclusively to physical preparation, he said, I should approach college football with the same mental focus I brought to my academic studies. I began to devour scouting reports and to analyze the complex reasoning behind defensive philosophies and schemes. I studied film and discovered ways to anticipate plays from the offense and become a more effective player. Armed with renewed confidence, I finally earned a starting position in the beginning of my fourth year.

Shows character traits in action

My team opened the season against Brigham Young University (BYU). I performed well despite the pressures of starting my first game in front of a hostile crowd of 65,000 people. The next day, my head coach announced the grade of every starting player's efforts in the BYU game at a team meeting: "Mahoney – 94 percent." I had received the highest grade on the team. After three years of A's in the classroom, I finally earned my first 'A' in football. I used mental preparation to maintain my competitive edge for the rest of the season. Through a combination of film study and will power, I led my team and conference in tackles. I became one of the best players in the conference and a leader on a team that reached the semi-finals of the Division I football playoffs. The most rewarding part of the season, though, was what I learned about myself in the process. When I finally stopped struggling to become the player I thought I needed to be, I developed self-awareness and confidence in the person I was.

Connects narrative and academic experience

Links character trait changes in the narrative to the field of law

Begins explicit appeal to the admissions audience

The image of me writhing in pain on the practice field slips back into my thoughts as I decide where to apply to law school. College football taught me to recognize my weaknesses and look for ways to overcome them. I will enter law school a much stronger person and student because of my experiences on the football field and in the classroom. My decision where to attend law school mirrors my decision where to play college football.

Connects narrative to the decision to attend law school

Explicit appeal to the selected school; see FAQ for more info

I want to study law at the University of Chicago Law School because it provides the best combination of professors, students, and resources in the country. In Division I college football, I succeeded when I took advantage of my opportunities. I hope the University of Chicago will give me an opportunity to succeed again.