The Application

Your application may be the first impression a law school receives of you. Accuracy and correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation count. Follow directions carefully and include all requested information as completely as possible.

The personal statement

Most schools require a personal statement of two to three pages. This should be viewed as an opportunity to talk about yourself and your strengths that are not reflected in your transcript or résumé, letters of recommendation, or elsewhere. The statement is a substitute in many ways for the personal interview, so let your personality emerge from the page. Do not restate the obvious or rehash material that the admissions committee will already have before them.

Tell the schools what you offer that perhaps no other applicant can. Accentuate experiences, traits, abilities and passions that set you apart. Be specific. Develop a narrative that will be engaging and worth the committee's time to read. Don't be too cute or unconventional. The personal statement is also your chance to explain anything on your record that may appear negative. In all cases, BE SURE YOUR GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION, AND SPELLING ARE CORRECT.

Sample personal statements are available at the Career Center and from the Pre-Law advisors for your review. Remember, however, that you are writing your personal statement that should reflect your own style. Don't rely on gimmicks or on someone else's style.

Seven focus areas

One highly respected director of admission offered the following advice on writing the personal statement. The applicant should pick 1-3 of the following seven focus areas and focus upon them. In choosing the focus areas, the applicant should keep in mind that letters of recommendation, the résumé, and other items also will offer information on the seven focus areas.

Interpersonal Skills

These include the ability to get along with others to respect others as one engages in controversy and confrontation. You might point out examples in which you have worked with others to complete a meaningful project. [Your letters of recommendation might also touch upon your interpersonal qualities].
Work Experience

The focus here is not upon the job title, but what was learned and how it will help the applicant in law school and after graduation. Internships can be an important form of work experience. If you decide to pursue a law-related internship, please talk with a Pre-Law advisor for ideas on how to make the internship work for you.

Activities Outside of School and Work

An admissions office looks for leadership on athletic teams, student organizations, church groups, and similar activities. Again, your personal statement should do more than simply list the position. You should tell about your experience and what you learned about leadership.

Career Focus

Even though law school graduates may pursue non-law careers, law schools like to see what tentative intentions the applicant has.

Motivation

Three types of motivation exist in this context. First, you must demonstrate some motivation for attending graduate school (that this is a thoughtful choice and not because you other options). Second, you must be motivated to get a law degree, even if you do not intend to practice law. Third, you must be motivated to get the law degree from this particular law school. The personal statement might examine all three forms of motivation.

Sensitivity to the Human Condition

Here, you should show two things. First, your ability to see the world through the eyes of someone else is important. Second, you must be able to empathize with the plights and problems of others. The latter has been called "the toughest job for an attorney." Your personal statement should illustrate how you came to possess these sensitivities and how they will impact your career as a law student and after graduation from law school. Study abroad experiences can be very valuable in this regard.

World View

This element also consists of two components. First, you need to demonstrate an ability to step back, transcend a problem or issue, and offer a solution to the problem. This as a key benefit of a liberal arts education. This first quality should not be confused with a "view of the world," which is a political or moral position. This latter trait is not a consideration in the application process. Second, you must demonstrate an analytical thought process, an ability to solve problems logically.
Filing the application

Your application must be timely

File your application in a timely manner. You should plan to have your applications completed and sent well in advance of the application deadlines. We recommend submitting in early November and December. This will maximize your chances of acceptance and of receiving financial aid, especially to schools with rolling admissions. **Do not** wait until the application deadline; most seats have been filled and most scholarship money is gone.

Rolling admissions

Many law schools use a rolling admissions process. These schools constantly review and respond to applications as they arrive. Some law schools will start reviewing applications in **late November**. Replies arrive to applicants about one month after the application is received. In most cases, it is best to apply early. More slots in the class are open and more scholarship money is uncommitted and therefore available. With rolling admissions, as committees fill the available positions in a class, your odds of acceptance get longer with every additional admittance before your application arrives.

Applicants who wait until February to apply have a limited chance at admission. The fact of rolling admissions affects when one takes the LSAT (June after the junior year and October of the senior year are best). Applicants whose GPA might rise significantly might also wait until fall semester grades are in.

Your application must be complete

Law schools will not look at applications until they are complete.

1. You submit the application and personal statement.
2. LSDAS sends a report with your transcript information and LSAT score (and perhaps your letters of recommendation).
3. You are responsible for making certain that your letters of recommendation are sent in a timely fashion—use the LSDAS Letter of Recommendation service.

Some applicants discover that even though they have filed their applications early, their files are delayed in the review process because the required letters of recommendation have not been received. This can seriously diminish chances of acceptance, especially if they are already borderline. If you use the LSDAS
Letter of Recommendation service, you can check to determine whether your letters have been forwarded.

Letters of recommendation

Most law schools require one or two letters of recommendation with your application, and even those that don’t will consider them with your application. You are strongly encouraged to use the LSDAS Letter of Recommendation service—to find out how to sign up, visit www.lsac.org.

Choosing letter writers

The rule of thumb in selecting a recommender is to look for the quality of the letter rather than the prestige of the writer. You may be acquainted with a senator or a judge who is willing to write you a letter even though she/he does not know you well (especially in terms of your intellectual abilities, leadership, or other law-related qualities). Such letters are generally a waste of the writer’s and the admissions committee’s time as they tend to be so general as to be meaningless. It is preferable to get a letter from someone unrelated to the legal profession who can tell the committee more about you than they can glean from your application or personal statement. Choosing favorable, enthusiastic recommenders is essential in that it does affect your admissions chances.

Try to choose recommenders who can be specific and who can write you the strongest possible letters. You can tactfully ask recommenders if they feel they know you and/or your work well enough to write you a strong letter. If a recommender seems reluctant to write a letter, find someone else. A lukewarm or negative letter will obviously damage your chances of acceptance. If recommenders are willing, be sure they are able to write you a good letter. Someone who is able to compare you with other students who have attended a law school to which you are applying can be particularly persuasive. Dealing with facts relevant to law school is appreciated by law schools, as is honesty. A letter that recognizes a candidate’s weaknesses, but is nonetheless laudatory can be of great help to an admissions committee.

Some schools specify that they prefer or require faculty recommendations, and do not consider a file until the faculty letters arrive. A strong faculty letter demonstrates an awareness of the student’s academic potential. The faculty letter should not just set out particular grades that a student earned in a particular class. As early as possible in college, the wise pre-law student will make every effort to get to know professors, and not just to enhance their law school applications with a strong letter. A good mentor-student relationship can enrich your undergraduate education immeasurably and sustain your intellectual life far beyond your college and law school years. A student who pursues special projects and
demonstrates true intellectual curiosity and initiative is certainly the kind of student that any good law school covets. A great letter of recommendation is simply a happy byproduct of a student’s hard work.

Faculty letters are not as significant for applicants who have been out of school for several years. Letters from employers, coworkers, or others in a position to evaluate your ability or character are appropriate. If you have maintained contact with one or more of your professors, you may of course provide a letter from him or her. If the school requires a faculty letter, you should try to comply even if you have been out of school for some time. You can include letters that amplify your time out of school. Students who are planning to apply to law school within a year or two after graduation from college may want to have letter from professors placed in their files before they graduate. The Pre-Law advisors and the Career Center have forms for students to use in such cases.

Waiving the right to read the letter

Usually, the letters of recommendation are sent to the law schools independently by the recommender. You will be asked whether you are willing to waive your right to see your letters of recommendation. Some argue that doing so will increase the credibility of the letters you receive. Certainly a glowing letter has more force if an admissions committee knows that the applicant has not and probably will not ever see it. If you believe that you would like to see the letter, you might want to think about why you requested a letter from the writer.

Getting the best letter possible

You can insure stronger letters by choosing your recommenders with care; then provide them with writing samples, relevant course work (save your work after semesters end), a résumé, and your personal statement. All will help them to know you better as a student and as a person.

Plan ahead when asking for letters of recommendation. Give your recommenders adequate time to prepare your letters. You should ask your recommenders a few weeks before you give them the forms if they are willing to write you a letter. Then make sure you give them at least three weeks to complete and mail the letters after you have given them the material. Asking a recommender on Monday to "write a letter and send it by Friday" demonstrates a grave disregard for her or his other duties and responsibilities. Certainly, it does not encourage your writer to speak well of your maturity and responsibility or to applaud your organizational skills. The result may be a less positive letter than you might otherwise have received.

You will get a better response from recommenders if you follow a fairly simple protocol:
1. Make a master list of all the schools to which you are submitting applications (specifying deadline dates: the dates you plan to mail your completed applications) If you are using LSDAS, you only need the writer to send one letter directly to LSDAS.

2. Note whether the letters are to returned directly to you, to the school, or to a pre-law advisor

3. Include a stamped, addressed envelopes for every form or letter (if you plan to pick up the letters, be sure you indicate the date when you plan to retrieve them)

4. Make sure all waiver forms are signed and that any part of the form that you are responsible for filling in is completed before you give it to the recommender (information should be typed or computer generated).

You may ask one recommender to provide letters for all of your applications. Most professors and employers understand that you will apply to multiple schools, and will write one letter to which they will make emendations as necessary. Alternatively, you can use the LSDAS service.

How many letters?

One law school director of admissions suggested that approximately 3 letters of recommendation are appropriate. His admissions office has a saying: "The thicker the file, the thicker the applicant." Too many letters of recommendation can be a drawback, especially for applications submitted near the March 1 application deadline (when those reading the applications are becoming tired).

The Dean's letter

Several law schools require a letter from a dean at your undergraduate institution. It does not substitute for one of the letters of recommendation. Often, the dean's letter simply provides your rank and indicates academic or disciplinary proceedings, but some schools require additional input from the dean. You should contact the Office of Student Affairs and arrange a meeting; be sure to let the dean know the purpose of your visit when you make the appointment.