

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE PERSONAL STATEMENT

Andy Cornblatt
Georgetown University Law Center

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, the advisors, some framework from which to work.

One word of caution should be noted here. I have been on law school panels with other admissions people who I have observed, at times, cringing when hearing my recommendations. Therefore, it is important to point out that I am one admissions person from one law school with a particular point of view. However, I think that it is fair to say that I am not too far out of the mainstream, if there is such a thing in this business.

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, since most law schools do not have formal interviews as part of the admissions process, 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. As to more specifically what the personal statement should contain, I subscribe to the theory that 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. I am more eager to read what they have to say about themselves as candidates for admission.

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. I know fully well that this is a lot easier to say than do. However, this is a large part of what we consider when looking at applicants. That is, how persuasive are they in discussing their own candidacy. It has been said that the law school application is the candidate's first case and I would agree with that.

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 term. 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 yourself from the pack. By stressing the strong points, whether it be in the academic area or the "subjective area", the applicant maximizes his/her chances.

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.

As for the weaknesses part of the formula, I am well aware that there are some people who would say that you should not discuss your weaknesses in a personal statement. They argue that to deal with your weaknesses only draws attention to them. There is merit in that, of course. The problem with that argument is that it supposes that attention would not be drawn to the weaknesses anyway.

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.)

The theory on which this proposal is founded is the same as that learned by students in a first year evidence class. If the other side has damaging information to your case, you introduce it first to defuse it on your terms. It is hard to look at a personal statement in terms of "damage control". But the fact of the matter is that unless applicants deal with their good and bad points up front in their way, we will deal with them in our way.

Finally, 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 restriction, of course. But my experience tells me that two pages is 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, I 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.

*Personal Statements
In Law School Applications
"The Icing on the Cake"*

*Howell Smith
Wake Forest University*

Your personal statement in law school applications is the confirmation of the profile that you have created by your whole application. It is the icing on the cake.

The admission officers will have looked at your UGPA and your LSAT score to understand how well you meet the commonly held quantitative standards.

They will have looked at your resume to see how you have gotten to where you are. The resume should have one page that shows the facts of your education, honors, and employment. It should continue with other pages that track your experiences, evidence of leadership, and skills. It is not the one page resume requested by businesses for their initial screening processes; it is more like the information someone might want if they were prepping an obituary for you. If you list campus activities, it will explain what they are to readers who are not from your campus. (At Wake Forest Project Pumpkin is a major service activity. A reference by you or your letter writers to your role in Project Pumpkin will have no meaning in New York without explanation in your resume) The resume is your factual reference sheet on your application file.

They will have looked at your letters of recommendation with mixed confidence.

NOW they look at your statement. What do they learn from it? First, they learn what sample of the work you judge to be the best that you can produce. It should be grammatically perfect with no misspellings no matter what Spell Check says. It should follow the given guidelines as to length. It is answering the questions, "So this is what you think is excellent work?" It is now considered acceptable to have friends read and critique your statement, but the ideas should come through your mind.

Second, it should reflect what is special about you. It should show what the law school will be missing if they do not accept you. What experience, attitude, or approach to life will be missing from their classrooms?

Third, it should show how you use critical thinking to understand the story you are telling.

Fourth, it should reflect a growth in you that makes your life story, as you have presented it in your whole application, have almost inevitably your acquiring education in the law as your next step.

Fifth, it should reveal the experience(s) that has most shaped you. BUT, it is not the place to show that you have had a bad time unless it also shows that you have overcome that bad time and are ready to handle law school without its being a diversion or handicap to your legal learning.

If you have a handicap, or a trauma disrupted your education, or a situation makes your academic record or LSAT an inaccurate reflector of your true capabilities and potential, it may be better to put that into an addenda to your application rather than making it the heart of your personal statement.

Sixth, it should be a convincing statement of why you will be able to begin thinking like a lawyer and will enjoy law. Recognize the salient points in your information and organize them well.

Do not write a personal statement that you could just as well use to apply for social work, nursing, or teaching training. For those of us who want to make the world better, it is easy to respond to the interest law schools have in volunteerism, etc., with a “do-gooder” story. Some of those who are judging your application will also be interested in your succeeding as a lawyer first and then your using your training and skills to do good. Give them reason to think you agree with them. They do not want to anticipate having to tell you cannot skip a law course final exam to ring a bell for the Salvation Army. Project the sophistication of your “do goodism.”

Also, do not provide a stream of consciousness literary essay even if it would have won you an A+ in creative writing. Make your impression in other ways. Variations in style are fine, but the underlying strong thinking is vital.

Thus, the admissions officers should read your statement and say that this is the quality that they would expect from that kind of applicant. One admissions officer said that you should think of a situation in which she had five seats left and thirty applicants standing in line. She collects the statements and from them picks who will most make her faculty and dean happy.

A last note is that some schools ask for more directed essays. Think what they want to learn and respond to their challenge. If they want to know what you will contribute to diversity, do not assume that they are only thinking racially. You are unique! Recognize why and tell them. If they ask for an essay and provide structured questions, write your essay for them in a way that the conclusion of your essay answers the question they asked.

Different law schools may seek different things in their applicants. If you want to read an elaboration of what some of the “top” school may want, you might read the chapters in Montauk, *How to Get into the Top Law Schools*. He says nothing new that pre-law advisors have not known for years, but he does elaborate on the points.

Good luck, and I hope that writing our personal statement helps you understand what you are doing at this hinge point in your life.

The Private I-The Personal Statement

Gerald L. Wilson, Duke University

Many, if not most, law schools require applicants to write what is generically referred to as a personal statement. Students often find this to be the most difficult part of the application process and seek guidance from prelaw advisors (and hopefully not from one of these *A Successful Personal Statements* books!) Because many law school admission officers indicate that the personal statement is the second most important item in the application (after LSAC score and UGPA), prelaw advisors can be especially helpful at this point.

First of all, the personal statement should be just what it says, personal, in the sense that it should be something that only that individual student himself/herself could write. Though opinions vary, in general, the statement should seek to connect the writer with the law school application. This is not to suggest that it should be a "I want to go to law school because".... piece but it probably will be more useful to an admissions committee if they can gain a sense of why the student is applying to law school. In brief, the statement may well be an intellectual/experiential autobiography that makes clear as to why the writer is applying to law school.

The essay, unless otherwise specified, and to make sure that it will be more than skimmed, in most cases should be no longer than two pages, double-spaced. It should, above all, be interesting. I cannot forget what one law school admission officer said about personal statements: "When I read a personal statement, I have one question in the back of my mind: Would I like to have a beer with this person?" (Or lunch if you prefer!) Think about what is being said there. Will the applicant be someone we want to get to know, someone who will add to the classroom experience and to the atmosphere of the law school?

Note carefully that the essay should attract the reader's attention (without being gimmicky) and should focus on the student, not the law. Below are opening paragraphs from two of the worst personal statements I have ever read. Would you want to get to know these students?

"The best preparation for the study of law is a broad-based undergraduate education. Studying a variety of subjects in both the natural and social sciences develops both reasoning and communication skills. Students must learn to apply logic to mathematical and social problems and to communicate using both words and numbers. In addition, extra-curricular activities and work experience improve a person's problem solving abilities and communication skills. My diversity of academic and extra-curricular experience is my strongest attribute as a law school candidate."

Or, "As an undergraduate, I have taken particular interest in the structural frameworks within which society's institutions confront recurring moral and ethical problems. Academically, I have focused on political institutions' reflection of the society's ethical sophistication, with special emphasis on the legal and judicial system in the United States. Additionally, my extracurricular activities have presented several opportunities to confront the ethical dilemmas of leadership in the unique circumstances indigenous to a university community. Together, my academic and extra-academic work have prepared and focused my interest in continued study of the law and legal institutions."

Conversely, without resorting to gimmicks the opening paragraphs of the following three statements immediately attract the reader and make the reader want to read on to get to know the applicant.

"As a little girl with olive skin, long black hair and large, dark but definitively non-western eyes, I was constantly subjected to the fascinated stares and inquiries of people curious about my nationality.

Hurt by the subtle implication that I might be different from the other kids, I would smile and give the elusive response *I'm an ethnic mutt*. In this age of political correctness, those words would probably never leave my mouth today, but an amalgamation of unusual and distinctive elements is actually still the best way to describe myself."

Or, "Until my mid-teens, I had believed that my father died when I was four years old. As a teenager I was told that the man I thought was my father was not my natural father. In order to conceive, my mother opted for a process known as Artificial Insemination by an Anonymous Donor, or AID. This revelatory information prompted me to research the AID phenomenon and the ramifications it posed to me as a child fathered in this unusual manner."

Or, "Two summers ago I worked as a black foreman of an all-white construction crew in rural Georgia. It proved to be an extraordinary experience which taught me a lot about myself and which sparked my interest in becoming a lawyer."

However, any good and exciting essay can be spoiled if not carefully proofread to eliminate misspellings, poor use of grammar, or awkward use of the language. **Proof Read** the document, and have at least one friend do it, too. Do not rely on spell-check on the computer. Sue and use, leaned and learned, for and fro, lust and must are all correct words but spell check may not help to discover problems with usage. A typo such as to for two suggests you do not pay attention to detail. Your documents are being read to evaluate your future performance as a good lawyer. Also, the personal statement may not be the place to discuss a bad semester or a personal matter that needs further explanation. This may best be handled by writing a separate statement. In the end, there is no formula for a successful personal statement, but there is one successful guideline: Be yourself!

SUMMARY OF NO NO'S FOR THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

1. Do not give the essay a title
2. Do not use quotations
3. Do not use dialogue
4. Do not write in the third person
5. Do not use the passive voice
6. Do not make the essay a narrative version of your resume
7. Do not use footnotes
8. Do not tell them about the law, talk about you
9. Do not be repetitive
10. Do not read one of those "Winning Essays That Got Me Into Law School" books
11. Do not compare yourself to other people, i.e. "I may not be as smart as many of your applicants, but I study hard." or "While my classmates are out partying, I am in the library working hard!"

SUMMARY OF DO'S

1-10 Be yourself! Make the members of the Admissions Committee want to get to know you and have you in class.