

Writing an Effective Personal Statement

Perhaps the single most often asked question by law school applicants is "what do law schools look for in a personal statement?" The short answer, of course, is that there is no short answer. There are, however, some guidelines and suggestions that I would like to offer which hopefully can give you, 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 mainstreams, 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 format 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 terms. Consequently, if there is some activity, work, or life experience that he/she is very proud of, that should be stressed and expanded on in the personal statement. I realize that the particular activity etc. may be listed somewhere else in the application. However, it is the applicant's responsibility (and advantage) to highlight the strongest parts of the application. One of the names of this game is to separate 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 simply not the case. Of course, the numbers are very important in any decision. But we read every personal statement. Applicants should be advised to write their statements with great care. In many cases, they will be the determining factor.

The Role of Style and Tone in the Personal Statement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

patent and manufacturing licenses. As a results of this legal research the project was able to create workable models for the technologies in our inventory. My work on this fellowship culminated with several published articles and an invitation to lecture on this subject in Japan.”

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

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

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

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