

# THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

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The only part of your application  
that you completely control.

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# What is the purpose of a Personal Statement?

- Give the Admissions Committee information that distinguishes you. (Think of it as an interview on paper.)
- Confirm that you are committed and ready to begin law school.
- Demonstrate that you are a good “fit” with the law school.
- Describe what will be your unique contribution to the first-year class.



# One more purpose of a Personal Statement

**Explain any anomalies or problems in your academic record.**

*E.g.*

- less than a full course load
- longer time to complete the program
- lower overall GPA than the law school mean
- failing grades
- withdrawals
- leaves of absence
- transfers



**Think of it as a substitute for an interview**

What would you hope to get across if you had 10 minutes to speak with the Admissions Committee?

# Common Concern

My life is unexciting. I have not won a Nobel Prize in Physics, starred in any major motion pictures, or dug wells in underdeveloped countries. Therefore, I have nothing to say.

The first two sentences are most likely true. But not the last one! Because, statistically, most of us have never won Nobel Prizes or Oscars, or spent a year working with famine victims in a flood-relief area, figure that you are in good company.

Nonetheless, you *do* have something to say.  
Say it well.



## What are the Elements of a successful Personal Statement?

They have strong beginnings, lively middles, and powerful endings that refer back to the beginnings.

They are coherent and revolve around a single theme.

They are responsive to the question asked.

They can be funny, sad, thought-provoking, or all three.

*Distinguish yourself!*



# Categories of Personal Statements

## 1. *Narrative that explains what led a person to apply to law school*

An intellectual journey, or something related to your background, or something related to your professional experiences.

It must be *personal* (i.e., about you) . . . not about how great school X is.

## 2. *Overcoming Obstacles*

Obstacle = major factor outside your control that affected how you grew up (illness, discrimination, persecution).

Do not let it define you if you do not want to! Do not sound victim-y or overshare!

“There is nothing about an obstacle that is inherently more compelling than a...”

...neutral personal experience, or

...an intellectual idea, or

...a professional experience.

## 3. *What I will contribute to [this law school] [the practice of law]*

- A hobby or interest
- A personal anecdote
- Op-ed style piece about an issue
- A policy argument,
- Descriptive essay about some concept that interests you.



# One more category

## 4. *Story Telling*

This is not a personal ad!

Do *not* list your qualifications (especially if prefaced by the word “uniquely”!) but try telling a story that shows you have:

- Intellectual ability
- Analytic ability
- Imagination
- Motivation
- Maturity
- Organization
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- Self-confidence
- Oral communication skills
- Written communication skills
- Career potential



# What do Admissions Committees Value?

## 1. *An authentic story about what has led you to law school*

If someone is giving you advice that does not feel right to you—do not follow it.

## 2. *Specificity and Insight*

Details make for interesting reading, and you need to grab the attention of an officer who is reading literally thousands of personal statements. Tell big stories if you have them, but do not forget to bring it back to you—it is a *personal* statement, after all, and whatever you relate should have changed you in some way.

## 3. *Someone who will be interesting to live with for 3 years*

Rather than someone who will drop out half-way through, or (worse, really) someone who will graduate and hate being a lawyer for a couple of years before he quits or (worst of all, really) someone who will graduate and hate practicing law her whole career.

## 4. *Devoting resources to someone who will use them well*

You think of your legal education as something that *you* spend money on, and rightly so. But the fact is that law schools think of your legal education as something that *we* spend money on. It costs more than your tuition to put you through law school.

Law schools are funded by the government, alumni donations, and grants, in addition to tuition dollars. You will be on the receiving end of that balance. Therefore, our perspective is we are spending money on each applicant we admit.

Use your personal statement as an opportunity to show us why we should invest in you.





# What else do Admissions Committees value?

## 5. *Not excluding wonderful candidates*

We think hard about that last student down on the list...the most qualified student to whom we sent a rejection letter. We know he or she would have succeeded here had she come. We do not like having to say no to anyone. We especially feel the awesome responsibility for being gatekeepers to a very scarce and important resource: a legal education that qualifies students to obtain an license to serve as a powerful voice on behalf of the people who have none, to design legislation and the status to make important decisions for other people. Therefore, when we admit you we know we are devoting resources to you and, necessarily, *not* allocating those resources to another person. Use your personal statement to distinguish yourself from an imaginary worthy candidate who has the same GPA and LSAT score as you.

## 6. *Diversity*

It is not just a buzzword, or code word for race. We want to build a class brimming with differences. Different perspectives, different family backgrounds, different areas of expertise, different professional skills, different economic circumstances, *etc.*

## 7. *Ability to Share and Collaborate*

One thing we want to see: collaboration, collegiality, ability to work with others. Does anyone really need another Poindexter hunched over her laptop on the third floor of the library guarding her GPA? Umm, no.

## 8. *Well rounded, interested and engaged students*

Do not write The One Trick Pony Essay. If you apply to law school, and you emphasize your fabulous dance career, great. If it is the center of every piece of your application, it is hard for us to see the full person.

## 9. *Cultural Curiosity and Flexibility*

Admissions committees like students who have had “cross-cultural” experience. Interpret “culture” broadly. Law schools want to hear about applicants who put themselves in another environment that is out of their comfort zone and excelled, enjoyed it, learned about another culture, and learned to fit in. The other culture doesn’t have to be across the ocean. It could be a home for people with dementia, or the Cub Scouts.



# What do Admissions Committees dislike?



## 1. *"I just love to argue"*

Many people write some form of the "I love to Argue" personal statement, which makes them: (1) totally cliché (2) seemingly clueless about why they are going to law school and (3) too lazy to think about it deeply.

Usually starts out with a personal anecdote from early childhood, and quote from Mom saying, "I just know you are going to be a lawyer." It is unrealistic to think a pile of stories about yourself being confrontational and argumentative will compel an admissions reader to admit you. Quite the opposite, really. Lawyers listen, think, craft careful arguments following strict conventions, and often only after performing hours of tedious research. Lawyers pick up the phone and resolve complicated issues by being able to see other people's perspectives and being creative and ultra-cooperative. Write an essay that shows *that* side of you!

## 2. *I just love "The Law" sooo much.*

I have been dreaming of going to Law school since I was 5." The Nurse who delivered me said, "this baby should be a lawyer!" The writer sounds a little goofy, and a little bit like someone who does not actually know very much about law. You have glamourized it, and admissions officers worry that when you wake up to reality you will be disappointed. Also loving "the Law" is like loving "Words" or "Music." Broad. Uninformed. What kind? What are you excited about? Why do you find it fascinating? How is it connected to your life? Dig a little deeper.

## 3. *Mysteries - There are two kinds of puzzles:*

- *Incoherent applicants*

Missing data—a 2 year gap with no explanation, a person whose essay enthuses about wanting to be an environmental lawyer but no undergrad classes, no extracurricular activities demonstrate any evidence of interest in the environment. (But see "one trick pony"!)

- *Confusing applicants*

Here is a real note an admissions officer at U Mich wrote on a file: "tenacious good? or tenacious crazy?" This is why additional readers are helpful. You think you telling an amusing story about how persevering you are, and the reader is thinking... "Stalker!" As a rule, avoid stories about your romantic adventures.

## Are there *\*more\** things that Admissions Committees make fun of?

### 4. *The Overcoming Obstacles Essay (But not really!)*

“I took a really hard math class, without taking the prerequisites. I failed. I was super mad! I hated my teacher! He was only a grad student! Because I am a really great student who has never failed anything before! Then I took the requisites, took the class again, and guess what!?!?!?? That’s right: I got an A!!!! The end.”

First, there is a difference between a disappointment and a major hurdle in your life. We interpret the word “obstacle” pretty narrowly. Many, many people are lucky enough to live and die never having to deal with serious illness, disabilities, divorce, abuse, war, poverty, or being a refugee. If we get 2,000 essays, you can be sure we get some applicants who actually *have* faced severe obstacles. Disappointments are merely things that you want and do not get. Beware of exposing your privilege, your self-centered expectations and sense of entitlement, and sounding either immature or deluded. Avoid the time you did not get the part in the school play, the time you lost an election for class president, *etc.* Rather, tell stories that show some self-awareness and growth. Demonstrate your understanding of the big picture and your place in it. “If you are fortunate to have encountered only minor bumps in the road on your path to greatness, consider yourself lucky and think about how being in that position has affected you—how you will make a better student because of it.”

### 5. *Horn Tooters*

I am uniquely. . . . I was told I had the \_\_\_est. . . .” Blech. Rather than finding some superlative adjectives to use about yourself (or that other people have used about you), simply say you studied X for Y years, you have read all of Dickens’ novels . . . whatever it is that demonstrates your commitment. *Show, don’t tell!* Even better, write about an insight you developed through your experiences.



# Top 10 Personal Statement Mistakes

This list, culled from discussions with admissions directors, lists the ten biggest mistakes applicants make on their law school personal statements. Most of these were discussed above.

1. Spelling and grammatical errors.
2. Sending a personal statement to school B meant for School A.  
*U Vic Law School does not want to read about your desire to attend Dalhousie.*
3. Merely summarizing your resume in essay form.
4. Staying too detached in your writing style and not letting your personality come through in your *personal* statement.
5. Focusing upon your weaknesses and not your strengths.
6. Using too many big words or “legalese.”
7. Spending just a few hours on your personal statement and submitting your first draft.
8. Exceeding the specified page or word limitations.
9. Stating that once admitted you will save the world. I am looking at you, business majors!
10. Using gimmicks such as writing in crayon, modeling your personal statement as a legal brief, or writing it as a poem.

# Random Tips

- Even if you do not write an “Overcoming Obstacles” essay, you can mention some hurdles you have faced. It does not have to be the central topic of your statement to affect the Committee and contextualize your application.
- If you have a marketable skill, mention it. Are you a CPA, a prima Ballet Dancer, or fluent in Mandarin? Even if your favourite hobby seems unrelated to law, it’s a demonstration of your drive, discipline, commitment, engagement, and intellectual curiosity. Work it in!!!!
- Tiebreakers: favour a more recent story over something that happened when you were younger; a personal experience over an academic or professional one.
- Strong introductions and conclusions help disproportionately.
- Picture the law school as a store, and picture yourself as a super-well informed customer, who is going there with a careful shopping list, a clear idea of the store’s strengths, what time of day they put out the fresh fruit, which is the fastest cash register line, and why this is the best deal for your money. The more you know, the smarter and more interested in the school you seem. Law schools like that.



# How to Proceed

- Getting started: Free write, talk with a friend, brainstorm *etc.*, But before you sit down to do your first draft have a theme, and a clear idea of what you want to convey. Have an outline.
- Tailor your personal statement for each application.
- Respect page limits and formatting instructions.
- Be scrupulously honest, and try to be very, very positive about the law school, yourself, and about the combination. Be optimistic and confident!
- Use the first person. Do *not* use slang, contractions, or clichés. Avoid informal language.
- Details make sentences more interesting. Trying to sound like a lawyer make sentences roll over and die.
- Have a super introduction and conclusion. At the end, refer back to your super opening paragraph and restate your theme.
- Consider using a brief addendum if there is something you feel you need to address, but it is not what you want to make the center of your personal statement.
- Go ahead and show your personal statement to people whose judgment you trust, teachers, etc.
- Edit, proofread, re-write. Edit for arrogance, judgment, grammar, formality. Set your grammar checker on “formal English,” and select every single sub-area you can. Tell your checker to identify the passive voice, contractions, clichés, *etc.*