Personal Statement Do's and Don'ts
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➤ "Tell them your life story."
➤ "Tell them how much you want to attend their school."
➤ "Sell yourself."
➤ "Explain your low LSAT!"

Sound familiar? If you are preparing a law school personal statement, you have probably been given some of the advice... on the left. Submitting a law school application that is competitive and will provide admissions committees with an accurate portrayal of your personal qualities is not an easy task, but it is one that is extremely important to your chance of gaining admission. Law schools are not just looking for students who have great numbers; they are looking for students who are diverse, interesting and who have varied life and work experiences. The LSAT and GPA, while immensely important, only tell a part of your story; it is the job of the personal statement to fill in the blanks.

I recently asked a few of my law school admission colleagues to assist me in compiling a list of personal statement Do's and Don'ts. Here is what I compiled:

Three things you should know before beginning to write:

1. your audience
2. your theme
3. your reasons

Knowing your audience will allow you to effectively target your statement and make it relevant. Knowing your theme will ensure that your statement is organized, easy to follow, and enjoyable to read. Knowing your reasons for attending law school will help convince schools that you are serious about this endeavor.

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DO treat your personal statement as if it is an admission interview. It is your best chance to make your case for admission and to communicate important information about yourself not readily ascertained by merely looking at your numerical profile.

DO follow directions. It is important to adhere to page limits set forth by schools. If they ask for 1-2 pages, give them 1-2 pages. In law school and in the legal profession concision is much appreciated, and the ability to follow directions is vital. And don’t try to cheat by using an unusually small font!

DO make your personal statement responsive. Individual schools may ask you to provide specific information in your statement. Be sure to respond accordingly.

DO write about yourself. We all have our own “stories” and life experiences. Thus, you should be sure to discuss those things that make you unique. This information, when presented with sincerity, can help improve your chance of admission by providing the committee with a well-formed image of who you are.

DO discuss your professional interests and goals. Though they may change before you finish law school, it is helpful to write about your goals and how a law degree would nurture and help you achieve them. This can be especially helpful if your inspiration is derived from specific life or work experiences.

DO conceptualize and outline your statement BEFORE beginning to write. Develop a theme. Ask yourself questions such as:

• “What message do I want to convey to the admissions committee?”

• “What should they know about me that is not apparent from other parts of my application?”

• “What qualities do I bring to the table?”

• “What life experiences have shaped who I am today?”

DON’T submit a narrative of your resume. While it is OK to choose one or two things from your resume to elaborate on, a statement that simply lists information already contained in your resume or vitae is boring and will not help you stand out.

DON’T even think about submitting your personal statement without having it reviewed by someone else for clarity, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. It is always helpful to have a fresh pair of eyes reviewing your writing, even after you have edited it several times.

DON’T rely too heavily on spell check. Spell check is a good initial tool to use in editing your personal statement, but it is not infallible. Spell check should not be your ONLY check!

DON’T submit a personal statement addressed to another school. It is important that you personalize statements to individual schools. In doing so, be sure to remove all references to other schools. Law schools are fully aware that applicants apply to multiple programs; but schools want to feel as if you have a “special” interest in their program.

DON’T write your statement with the goal of telling schools what you think they want to hear. Sincerity is important and recognizable.

DON’T fill your personal statement with excuses or sob stories. Many applicants submit statements replete with excuses as to why their grades are poor, why they did not volunteer, etc. Oftentimes, these statements become litanyes of negative life experiences and hardships. While it is important to explain certain negative aspects of your life, be careful not to “over excuse” yourself. Schools are more concerned with how you were able to change negative behaviors or overcome adverse situations to positively affect your life.

DON’T overuse quotes, poems, and clichés. While it cannot be denied that luminaries like Robert Frost, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others are sources of inspiring
DO write your own personal statement. Avoid those commercial “How To” books on statement drafting. Originality is the key! Admissions committees recognize the hackneyed phrases and statements frequently “borrowed” from those publications.

DO remember that there is a fine line between humor and annoyance. Gimmicky statements, such as those written in the third person, are not always well received. So if you decide to walk that line, be careful!

thoughts and ideals, the significance of some of their most quoted material has been lessened by overuse. The same is true for popular clichés. Thus, before including popular expressions in your personal statement, ask yourself whether the expression is an integral part of the theme of your statement and whether the expression will help your statement stand out. If the expression does neither, do not include it.

DON’T forget that the personal statement is a formal document. Avoid the use of informal language, contractions, and other things that signify a lack of formality or seriousness.