TELLING YOUR STORY: LEVERAGING THE WRITTEN PARTS OF YOUR LAW SCHOOL APPLICATION

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NARRATIVE PIECES IN THE APPLICATION

- Personal Statement
- Diversity Statement (Required and Optional)
- Other Statement(s) (Required and Optional)
 - Required Addenda
 - Discretionary Addenda
 - Other Questions/Explanations
 - Resume

YOUR WRITING IN CONTEXT

Understand the role of the written parts of your application. Why is a Personal Statement important?

Understand how the Personal Statement fits in with the other parts of your application. How is the Personal Statement "weighed" by reviewers?

Understand what Admissions Offices are really looking for. How and why do the written parts of an application make or break an application?

THE ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE PERSPECTIVE

- Do you have a good enoughLSAT?
- Do you have a good enough GPA?
- Did you do enough extracurriculars or have work experience?

- Can you do the work?
- What else will you contribute (other than being capable and smart) to our classroom, conversations, the study of law, the legal profession?
- Are you someone we need and/or want in our community?

PARTS OF THE APPLICATION

Test Scores

- LSAT (single or multiple; highest or average; other)
- Other* (GRE, GMAT)
- Addenda

 optional or
 required (could include
 SAT/ACT)

Academic Record

- Not just undergrad GPA
- CAS Report: uGPA as calculated by LSAC
- Advanced degrees*
- Addendaoptional or required
- Resume info

Personal Attributes

- Personal Statement (2-4 pages)
- Resume
- DiversityStatement*
- "Why X School" Statement*
- Addenda
 optional
 or required
- Letters of Rec
- Interviews*

Personal Statement

Diversity/
Other
Statements

Required Addenda

Optional Addenda

Who you are - In you own voice

How you came to be who you are

Where you come from

What you care about (and why)

How all these parts (your identity, your journey) shape your perspective

Why that perspective matters (your contribution)

PERSONAL STATEMENT

RULE #1

• In reality, there is only one rule for Personal Statements:

Follow the Directions

"If I knew what I was supposed to do, I would find my way." - Joy Harjo

PERSONAL STATEMENT

- A PS is NOT a Statement of Purpose.
 - SoP asks: What do you want to study? Why do you want to study it? What experience do you have in your field? Who would you like to work with? What unique scholarly contribution will you make in your field? What do you plan to do with your degree once you have it?
 - None of these questions must be answered by your PS.
- This is truly an essay, and it supposed to be truly PERSONAL. Average 2 pages; Range 250 words – 4 pages.
- Close relationship with your resume.



- Why is the law school right for you?
- In what ways will having you in the classroom make a difference?
- How do you demonstrate strong potential for leadership?
- How is your academic achievement remarkable?
- Why do you want to attend a specific law school?
- What do we absolutely have to know about you that we would not otherwise be able to discern from your application if not for the fact that you talked about it in your personal statement?
- If we already know what you did (grades, major, work and volunteer experience, test-taking ability, etc.) what else can you tell us? (e.g., why you picked the things that you picked and how they relate to who you are where you are from)
- What would you tell me if you were able to interview?

QUESTIONS TO CONTEMPLATE BEFORE STARTING YOUR PS

PERSONAL STATEMENT DO'S

- Use your own voice.
- Tell your own story.
- Be unafraid. Claim your space.
- Have a point.
- Make connections.
- Ask yourself, "What makes me different?" The goal should be to nicely package who you are, not try to cram yourself into the generic package you think we want to receive.



PERSONAL STATEMENT MAYBES

- Do you need to (or should you) specifically state why you want to go to law school (generally) or what (specifically) you plan to do with a law degree?
- Do you need to talk about why you want to go to X or Y Law School specifically?

PERSONAL STATEMENT DON'TS

- Don't (with a few narrow exceptions):
 - Limit yourself to "law-related" topics.
 - Use a non-essay format.
 - Write a narrative version of your resume: "First I did this, then I did this, from that I learned this, next I did this..."
 - Start with a quote from a famous person. * *
 - Tell other people's stories instead of your own.**
 - Make claims unsubstantiated by your record.

NEVER EVER EVER:

- Use gimmicks (e.g. "The Obituary")
- Use <u>lazy</u> metaphors (fire, running, oysters, socks...you name it, someone's tried it).
- Write a legal brief.
- Make silly grammatical errors.

SPECIFIC CONCERNS AS AN UNDERREPRESENTED APPLICANT

- "I don't want to seem like I'm telling a sob story."
 - "It's never the changes we want that change everything."
 Junot Díaz, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
- "I don't want to feel like I'm bragging."
 - "To have privilege in one or more areas does not mean you are wholly privileged.
 Surrendering to the acceptance of privilege is difficult, but it is really all that is expected.
 What I remind myself, regularly, is this: the acknowledgment of my privilege is not a denial of the ways I have been and am marginalized, the ways I have suffered."
 — Roxane Gay, Bad Feminist: Essays
- "Why do I always have to write about by race/ethnicity?"
 - "In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate." Toni Morrison
- "But my experience really isn't all that unique!"
 - "I'm not so weird to me."
 - Haruki Murakami, The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle

PS WRITING **STEP #1:** SELF STUDY, JOURNAL, **FREE** WRITE

"...I am human. I am messy. I'm not trying to be an example. I am not trying to be perfect. I am not trying to say I have all the answers. I am not trying to say I'm right. I am just trying—trying to support what I believe in, trying to do some good in this world, trying to make some noise with my writing while also being myself."

- Roxane Gay, Bad Feminist: Essays

PS WRITING STEP #2: MAKING A LIST

Pursue the authentic-decide first what is authentic, then go after it with all your heart. Your heart, that place you don't even think of cleaning out. That closet stuffed with savage mementos.

Louise Erdrich, <u>Original Fire: Selected and New</u>
 <u>Poems</u>

SIDEBAR: HOT TOPICS

Sexual Violence or Abuse

Domestic Violence (Witness and/or Victim)

Mental Health

Criminal History

Substance Abuse LGBTQ, Gender Identity and Representation

Immigration Status "who would believe

the fantastic and terrible story of

• All our survival" – Joy Harjo

PS WRITING STEP #3: ASSESS AND GROUP



WHERE DO I PUT THIS STUFF?



THINGS CAN OVERLAP ACROSS DIFFERENT WRITTEN PIECES, BUT SHOULD NOT BE REDUNDANT.



ANYTHING YOU ADD SHOULD BE **NECESSARY** AND **NEW**.

PS WRITING STEP #4: GROUP ATTRIBUTES

- What things on your list "go together"?
- What are the Big Picture ideas? Themes? Metathemes?
- Examples: Perseverance, Resilience, Advocacy, Translation, Curiosity, Risk-Taking, Overcoming, Relationship with the Law, Potential, Leadership, etc.
- How do these things work together to tell people who I am?

PS **WRITING** STEP #5: PUT MEAT ON THE **BONES**

Link examples and anecdotes to themes and ideas.



Where will my examples fit as support for assertions about my attributes and/or potential contribution(s)?

PS WRITING STEP #6: STRUCTURE & ORGANIZE

- "When we are young, the words are scattered all around us. As they are assembled by experience, so also are we, sentence by sentence, until the story takes shape."
- Louise Erdrich, <u>The Plague of Doves</u>

- Writing Basics for Flow, Form, and Style
 - An admissions officer's secret identity: the Grammar Police.
 - No incomplete or run-on sentences.
 - Count your commas, colons, and semi-colons.
 - Circle your starting words.
 - Vary sentence length.
 - Avoid the passive voice "had" is not your friend.
- Sometimes less is more no need to go crazy with the adjectives. I just want to know you can write a good sentence and that you have your own story to tell.
- Good books: <u>Elements of Style</u> (Strunk and White), <u>A Rulebook for Arguments</u>
 (Weston), <u>The New Oxford Guide to Writing</u> (Kane), <u>On Writing Well</u> (Zinsser),
 <u>Naked, Drunk, and Writing: Shed Your Inhibitions and Craft a Compelling Memoir</u>
 (Lara).

PS WRITING STEP #7: EDIT, EDIT, EDIT



Sharing with others for suggestions, edits, feedback.

PS WRITING STEP #8: QUALITY CONTROL



Don't rely on Spell Check.



Avoid using a specific law school name – or do so with extreme caution.



Read it out loud. Does it sound like you?

PS WRITING STEP #9: ACTUALLY PRESS SEND

"Perfection to me is, I walk away from a situation and say, 'I did everything I could do right there. There was nothing more that I could do."- Drake

Topics not in your PS

Topics touched on in your PS, in greater depth

Things that are important, but maybe feel less central to your narrative (Socioeconomic disadvantage, First-Gen, etc.)

Why you are applying to a specific law school and/or program

DIVERSITY OR OTHER STATEMENT(S)

DIVERSITY STATEMENT (DS)

- Refer back to your list. Did anything important not make it into your PS? If no, no need for a DS (unless the school asks for one). If yes...
 - Is that missing information critical to understanding who you are? If no, no need for a DS (unless the school asks for one). If yes...
- "The root of oppression is the loss of memory." – Paula Gunn Allen, <u>The</u> <u>Sacred Hoop</u>

(TYPICAL) REQUIRED ADDENDA

Criminal Record

Honor Code Violations

Gap in Education

Professional Sanction

ADDENDA 101: REQUIRED ADDENDA

- Typical Reasons an addendum is required: Legal problems (particularly criminal), student conduct or Honor Code violations, break in education...
- READ THE QUESTION CAREFULLY.
- ERR ON THE SIDE OF DISCLOSURE.
- BE TRUTHFUL AND TRANSPARENT.
- TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.
- Length 1 paragraph to 1 page.

EXAMPLE

Misconduct

- If you answer "Yes" to any of the questions below, please attach an addendum explaining the circumstances. Note that an affirmative answer to these question does not necessarily preclude or even prejudice admission to Berkeley Law. Your answer will be reviewed on an individual basis in relation to all aspects of your experience, academic achievement, and potential. If your answer to any of the following questions becomes affirmative after you submit your application, you are required to notify the Admissions Office in writing.
- 1. Have you ever been arrested for or convicted of any offense, excluding minor traffic and parking violations, or is any such charge now pending against you? Yes No
- 2. Have you ever been subjected to a dismissal, suspension, probation, or other disciplinary or academic sanction by any college, university, or professional school? Yes No
- 3. Have you ever been subject to discipline by a professional organization? Yes No

GPArelated (General)

Grade Trends

LSAT-related

Misc. "Blips"

OPTIONAL ADDENDA

ADDENDA 201: OPTIONAL ADDENDA

- Explanations and context for "blips." Think of them as footnotes for your CAS report.
 - GPA: grade trend, outlier grades, rigor of major, school, etc.
 - LSAT score: Multiple scores, Non-predictive for grades, score cancellation, etc.
 - BE SURE YOU ACTUALLY NEED TO WRITE THESE.
- You've just got more to say (e.g., the "Why Berkeley?" essay). Length: 1
 paragraph to 1 page.
 - Increasingly, schools are prompting for these (although mostly still keeping them optional). Be prepared to write one, and don't rely on website review.

AN APPROACH TO STRUCTURING ADDENDA

The standard format that I recommend is:

- (1) Start with what you want (we have limited time, you need to tell me right away why I should keep reading)
- (2) Identify the issue (I'm going to see it anyway, may as well just put it out there)
- (3) Make your best argument/neutralize the issue
- (4) End on a positive note. What do you have to offer that (a) there is evidence of in your record, and (b) can't be measured by a standardized test?
- Also, be sure to send in a copy of your SAT score report as documentation (or note that documentation is available upon request) if you're writing an LSAT-exception addendum.

ADDENDA SIDEBAR – HOW MANY IS TOO MANY?

A LAW SCHOOL RESUME

Length: 1-2 pages (unless instructed otherwise in the directions!)

Not a C.V.

Not trying to get a job! (No objective)

This really is a "cheat sheet" or road map for the application reader.

Don't get cute. No fancy designs, no photos, avoid colors.

No need to tell me you can use MS Word, etc.

Nothing pre-college.

Don't assume we know what an activity or organization name means, or what you did in your role.

Bullet points are very helpful.

A LAW SCHOOL RESUME, CONTINUED.



Follow directions!

Use very basic formatting - avoid colors, shapes, images (including photos)

Up to 2-3 pages (unless otherwise directed)

Use headings to your advantage (see below)

Use bullet 3-4 points to convey key points and accomplishments

Show commitment: List dates, possibly hours per week or month

Use consistent formatting – indentation, bold, italics, etc.



Do not include an objective (we know it is to gain admission to our law school)

Do not list "basic" skills (e.g., MS Office proficiency)

Do not include information from high school

Do not use "weird" fonts

Do not use font size less than 11 point

Do not limit yourself to "law related" activities - be inclusive!

Watch your margins (we have to read it!)

Layout At the top, centered:

Name LSAC Account Number Address, Phone, Email (Tribal Affiliation)

The first section is always Education.

After Education, the **heading titles** and order is up to you, but "Interests" or "Other" always go last.

Pick and choose to best represent your background, highlighting strengths and minimizing weaknesses:

- Honors and Awards
- Scholarships
- Experience
- Professional Experience
- Volunteer Experience
- Advocacy Experience
- Certificates (or Certifications)
- Leadership
- Campus Leadership
- Community Involvement
- Research
- Community Service

- Publications
- Other
- -Parenting and Caretaking Responsibilities
- -Community/Cultural Roles
- -Responsibilities
- -Other Skills (inc.) technical skills, interesting skills, art, music, etc.
- -Athletics
- Interests and Abilities (this is preferable to "Hobbies")
- Activities
- Certifications
- Languages (or include under "Other Skills"); consider including level of fluency

Under each heading, list:

- Title/position
- List multiple roles with the same employer or organization (to show progression)
- Employer/organization
- Dates of involvement, hours per week or month, and 3-4 bullet points (not full paragraphs or other big chunks of text)

Also:

- Avoid acronyms (or define them in parentheses).
- Consider adding information about the organization
- Consider highlighting "Key Accomplishments"
- Use consistent tenses (past v. present). Present is only appropriate if you currently hold the role.

Sample Active Verbs:

- Managed
- Led
- Coordinated
- Created
- Supervised
- Taught
- Integrated
- Engaged
- Discussed
- Communicated

- Addressed
- Developed
- Designed
- Translated
- Mentored
- Oversaw
- Completed
- Researched
- Facilitated

- Navigated
- Generated
- Provided
- Supported
- Presented
- Performed
- Assisted
- Key Accomplishments Included:

EXAMPLE

Experience

La Señorita Mexican Restaurant, Traverse City, Michigan Server

11/14 - Present

- Present menus to guests and accurately record orders
- Answer questions about menu selections and make recommendations as requested
- Deliver food orders, remove plates, and clean tables in a fast and friendly manner
- Anticipate and address guests' service needs

Parsons Law Firm, Traverse City, Michigan

9/14 - Present

- Legal Intern
- Assist in drafting and reviewing court orders and jury instructions
- Provide note-taking for hearings, interviews, and meetings
- Research case facts and compile notes on evidence
- Perform reception duties including phone calls, coordinating meetings, and filing

Dan's Airport Transportation, Traverse City, Michigan *Taxi Driver*

9/14 - Present

- Transport customers in a safe and efficient manner
- Calculate fares and make change as necessary
- Provide friendly and courteous customer service

Compare these two examples: Which one do you think is more persuasive - A or B?

A.

Legal Assistant

September 2021-present

Jones and James LLC

- Responsible for collecting and copying important forms and documents
- Helped attorneys with day-to-day tasks such as billing and filing
- Attended local events and helped advertise firm

В.

Legal Assistant

September 2021-present

Jones and James LLC

40+ hours/week

A boutique immigration law firm serving California's Central Valley

- Lead a small team of legal support staff in a fast-paced, direct client services environment, managing all aspects of business operations.
- Leverage bilingual skills to assist Spanish speaking, immigrant clients with complex, high-stakes legal needs.
- Created Spanish versions of key client resources such as instructions for DACA renewal and "Know Your Rights" guides on topics such as what to do if ICE officials show up at your workplace or children's school.
- Contribute to the growth of the firm by developing community-based partnerships in local churches and non-profit organizations and delivering evening workshops on topics such as applying for health benefits and self-advocacy.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

- Nothing else has any efficacy, I might as well be myself.
 - But your yourself sucks!
 - It is, lamentably, all I have.
- Junot Díaz, <u>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</u>

"Anybody can act violently – there is nothing to it; but not every person is able to destroy his enemy with his words."

- Leslie Marmon Silko Storyteller