

Six important do's and don'ts for your personal statement

BY HILLARY MANTIS

Your personal statement can make or break your law school application, especially at this time of year, when admission is increasingly competitive. Let's say it's between you and three other applicants, all with the same GPAs and LSAT scores. Who's going to be admitted?

The law school admissions committee will be looking closely at all components of your application. Your personal statement is definitely one of them. So, if the directions from the law school as to what you should write about are kind of vague, here's what you need to know.

1. Pick one theme: As a pre-law adviser, I read a lot of personal statements that are stuffed with information on numerous topics. Some essays jump from topic to topic without any transitions. They end up being a confusing mishmash — kind of like a resume gone wild. You should have one topic. There should be an overall theme, with a beginning, a middle and a conclusion. You have other opportunities to include jobs and activities in your application. The really good essays sound like well-written pieces that might appear in a magazine.

If you are writing a second essay, you will need a second theme. The good news is that second essays tend to be shorter than the main essays. Generally, second essays are optional — but if you are really interested in the school, always do them.

2. Be interesting: I read tons of drafts of personal statements at this time of year. I can only imagine how many more each law school admissions officer reads each day. Many people write about how they want to go to law school to change the world. Noble as that may be, unless you actually tell me how you personally plan to bring about change, it's not going to move me. I recently read an essay about how a student traveled on break to build a house with Habitat for Humanity. Now, that was interesting. I once read one about a student who volunteered in a nursing home and tried to correct injustices there. Years later, I still remember it.

3. You are the star of the essay: Although many applicants will mention their families, friends, professors or coaches in their statements, the essay can only have one star: you. So while it's totally fine to mention others, the central focus of the story should be

on you, your life, your goals and your desire to attend law school.

4. Avoid the kitsch: Although the videotaped essay shot by her pool got Elle Woods into Harvard Law School in "Legally Blonde," you should probably avoid doing something along those lines, according to admissions officers I have met. You would not believe the stories they have told me about the YouTube videos they've received, gifts sent to them, baked goods, etc. The list goes on and on.

Other things to avoid: starting your essay with a quote; using tiny type to squeeze more words into the essay; and going over the specified page limit. While essays are generally expected to be two pages, double spaced, look at each law school's application directions for their specific guidelines.

5. Good grammar: It's easy to mess up your chances by having typos in your essay, or God forbid, by mentioning the wrong law school. This is easy to avoid. Have three people you trust read over your essay, and then read it to yourself out loud before sending it in. Avoid paragraphs that are more than 10 lines long and sentences that have more than two commas. Don't think term paper; think short magazine article. Use short, declarative sentences.

6. Find a good topic: Start by making a list of your college activities. Then make a list of all of your summer jobs and internships and volunteer work. Write down all of your travel experiences. Then, list anything memorable about your high school years, upbringing and family. Look the list over — chances are it will spark at least one idea. If not, there are lots of books on essay writing that will help you by giving examples of topics. Or go see your pre-law adviser. Like me, he or she will, no doubt, have lots of opinions about what's good and not good to include in your personal statement.



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