

PERSONAL STATEMENT: THE BASICS

I. Disclaimer

→Personal Statement advice is a subjective business. Everyone has an opinion about what you *should* write about. That being said, included in this handout is a compilation of opinions about personal statements directly from people who sit on admissions committees. Additionally, the Prelaw Center also has a handout with quotes directly from admissions deans.

→However, at the end of the day, regardless of what anyone else tells you, this is *your* personal statement. You are the one putting your neck out on the line. You are the one who will be living with the admissions committee's decision to accept or reject you. So whatever you end up writing, *you* are ultimately the one who needs to feel good about it. Keeping that in mind, here is what the BYU Prelaw Center advises...

II. How to Think About the Personal Statement

→ For starters, one admissions committee member said, "Imagine that the committee is sitting in a room and has your application—resume, transcript, LSAT, etc. Then imagine that you get 2-5 minutes to come in and make your pitch to them about *why else* they would want you to come to their law school. What would you say? What makes you different from the 30 other applicants who, simply based on numbers, look exactly like you? What do they *need* to know about you before making an informed decision?"

→The truth of the matter is law schools don't just care about LSAT and GPA, though those are the gatekeepers. The people sitting on these committees have to live with you for 3 years and so will your future classmates. They want to know if you are going to stick with it, if you are going to add something to the class, if you are going to bring a different perspective from anyone else.

→All of this being said, you can write about *anything*. You can write about background, interesting hobbies, unusual experiences—whatever makes you the so much more interesting person than you look like on paper, whatever brings you to life and makes you the person your friends and family love. Some examples:

*One student wrote about his weekend hobby of being a bare-back bronc rider.

*One student wrote about a time when she was mugged at gunpoint, then chased after the perpetrator to reclaim her purse.

*One student wrote about conducting a mice experiment while in high school that resulted in hundreds of mice running around in cages in his room until his mom made him get rid of them because the smell was so bad.

*One student wrote about working in a factory where he literally "pulled chain" all day long.

III. Format

→ Make your personal statement 3 pages in length, double-spaced. Then "make it fit" for the different schools by pulling margins, changing font, etc. Of course if the school has very strict limitations (e.g. a word count, or a font restriction) you need to follow those restrictions.

→In thinking about your unique experiences, try to narrow it down to 2-3 things you want to talk about. Once you have identified 2-3 things, then write *specific, narrative, memorable stories* about those 2-3 things, averaging $\frac{3}{4}$ -1 page per story.

For example, a student could write, "I grew up in Sweden. It was neat. I had a lot of international experiences there and learned a lot." OR a student could write, "I used to be left-handed, but I am not anymore. In Sweden, you cannot be left-handed. I learned this on my first day of kindergarten while I sat at my desk faithfully writing the letter "A" over and over again during writing time. My kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Green—a large, red-headed woman—was walking slowly in between the desks. When she reached mine, she stopped. I looked up to see her eyes bulging out of her head. She began screaming in Swedish, a language I did not know at all. When she finally calmed down enough to translate into English she said in a voice I will never forget, 'Writing with your left-hand is the devil's work. You will *never* write with your left-hand again.' I never did."

→Now, because this is a writing sample as well as a time to convey more information, you do want to have your stories leading to a conclusion. So you write your stories and make sure you have transitions between them (though these can be something as brief as "Five years later") then, at the end, write a 3-5 sentence conclusion that does the following:

- First, pull your 2-3 stories together into some kind of a bigger theme so the reader can see how they all fit together. The theme can be something as general as overcoming challenges or facing new experiences.
- Second, apply this theme to law school so that the reader can understand how these stories tie into law.
- Third, tell the reader why, in 1-3 sentences, you want to go to law school so that the reader knows your motivation for going and so that you have clearly answered the question asked.

IV. Polish

→First, a personal statement needs to truly represent you as a person; therefore most students go through many drafts before getting to a final version. Do not get discouraged. This is a part of the process. Friends and family are great resources for reading. The Prelaw Advisor will also read as many drafts as you write.

→Second, your personal statement needs to be perfectly polished—no glaring typos or grammatical errors. Do the best you can, have some friends and family proofread it, then feel free to bring your final draft to the Prelaw Center for technical editing.

V. Personal Statement Don'ts

→Do not regurgitate your resume or summarize your life.

→Do not put an opening line eye-catcher just for the sake of catching the eye.

→Do not explain bad grades or bad LSAT scores in a personal statement. Do this in an addendum.

→If you are applying to BYU or the U of U, 60-70% of their applicant pool are return missionaries, so if you do want to tell a mission story as one of your 2-3 stories, put it in middle or last and do NOT make the story a mission story that anyone who has served a mission could tell (e.g. overcoming language barrier, eating strange food, dealing with a difficult companion, etc.).