

A Collection of Thoughts on the Personal Statement

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Panelists	
Michelle Allison Davis	Loyola University New Orleans School of Law, Dean of Admissions and Minority Affairs
Melanie Nutt	Wake Forest School of Law, Director of Admission and Financial Aid
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The process of developing a Personal Statement is a unique endeavor. Each student needs to properly evaluate the required components provided by the law schools to which they are applying and follow each instruction exactly as written. Then begin to develop the statement to match the requirements.

The candidate should think of the document as an interview with the law school. This may be the only opportunity the interviewer has to learn about you as a complete candidate. What is it you wish the reader to know about you? No part of the application is taken on its' own merit. This can be the piece where you can provide substance and details about yourself. It is your chance to open a door into who you are for the law school. If well done, it will provide insight into how well you know yourself, how you think, what you value, how you write, how well-rounded you are or have become over time, and what you have been able to learn from the experience of living.

In my experience as an academic adviser and instructor in the First Year College of new students, freshmen, I encourage them to begin the development of these thoughts from the day they arrive on campus. Too often, in experience with juniors and seniors, who come to me as the Pre Law adviser, I find this group has not been encouraged to begin this process earlier.

Many students have not spent any time, or personal energy, in the efforts which lead to an understanding of who they are, what they have learned about life in addition to their course work/transcript, or what these experiences have meant to them, in the larger scheme of their world view. Our discussion then must begin with that dialogue, before we can get to the next part, the construction of the Personal Statement.

Each of the Panelists evaluated and discussed the following points regarding the Personal Statement.

Informal Interview

- Consider this a professional, yet informal interview with the law school
- Tailor the response to the exact guidelines of each school. Read each applications' requirements carefully and follow these directions
- What has the reader learned about you as a person, and do they now care
- Creating a personality around which the remainder of the application will be read

Time, Process and Structure

- Introduction, body or detailed supporting paragraphs, and conclusion
- Edit, edit, edit and then read aloud both to yourself and to another person
- Take time, draft, work with others to evaluate your statement
- Have someone else read statement. Most schools have a Writing Center, check to see if tutorial support might be available in the proof
- Answer the question/s that is/are being asked (cannot be overstated, follow directions precisely)
- Efficient, concise but brief within two pages if at all possible (remember Law Schools Admissions' Officers will be reading hundreds, in some cases, thousands of these statements)
- Reasonable margins, font size and length. Essentially 1", 10-12 depending on font (Arial works well at 11) and at least single spacing that is legible to the normal eye
- Some schools may ask for specific guidelines, follow these exactly

Topics and Content

- Read and follow all directions included in the application from the individual schools
- Unique nature of your experience – life experiences: talent, skill athlete – commitments personal experiences, career ambitions, or diversity of life experience
- Unique nature of who you are for the many reasons that have developed/created these characteristics
- A particular life experience that has created an interest in law
- Incorporate that which was exceptional, worthwhile, and activities that mattered
- What makes the person a special /unique candidate
- Grade trends should be explained in an addendum, not here, unless this information is relevant and critical to the statement
- Avoid duplication, do not include information that is found in another part of the application (resume, transcript, application form)
- Leadership, student government, community Service can be included, again, only if these are pertinent to the statement, otherwise these will appear on the resume

Qualities

- Passion, sincerity, depth, authenticity, perseverance, and character.
- Thoughtfulness in writing. Determination vs. “I’m a hard worker” – how, why, growth development.
- Personalized information that can support both strengths and weaknesses without being arrogant on the one hand or defensive on the other.

What does not impress and a caution with the style

- “I’ve always wanted to go to law school since I was 3”
- Carelessness – Careless errors/Language
- Sent left arm, “I’d give my left arm”
- Whole life history. Single Space. Too much!
- Be very careful with poetry and humor
- A caution especially with humor, must be well used and creative, if used at all
- Don’t send a shoebox with a note that says “I’d like to get my foot in the door”
- Back to the future, looking back.
- Do not be too anything: self-effacing, proud, self-absorbed
- Lack of humility
- No whine zone!

A portion of this information was collected at the “Personal Statement Session”, SAPLA, Fall 2002 & 2003 Conferences. Also from the Handbook articles by Gerald Wilson and Andy Cornblatt, and from Writing Tutorial Services, Indiana University, & Bloomington, IN. Paper developed by Mary A. Tetro, NC State University