

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE PERSONAL STATEMENT

Personal statements are the piece of the application that allows you stand out as a unique applicant. Admissions committees see *lots* of essays, so here are some points to keep in mind while planning, drafting, and revising your essays. As you will see, writing an effective personal statement will take a long time. Give yourself *at least* four months to compose and refine your essay.

KNOW YOURSELF; KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE.

Before you can write an effective essay, you must understand the product you are trying to sell—yourself.

Start thinking about yourself as a law school applicant today! What do you want schools to know about you? What motivates you? What obstacles have you overcome? What life events have affected you? Why do you want to be a lawyer in the first place? In other words: **what makes you unique?** Instead of sitting down to a blank screen and waiting for a great essay to emerge, spend some time brainstorming and freewriting the answers to those questions. Then, go back and pick specific ideas, details, and phrases that you can incorporate into your personal statement.

Also, **research your audience.** Figure out what the school values by looking at their materials and spend some time thinking about how you already possess these traits or share these values. What key words do they repeat? What kinds of courses do they offer? How do these differ from other schools?

WHAT SHOULD I INCLUDE?

- **Anything and everything** the prompt tells you to include. No exceptions to this rule. If they ask for it, and you don't provide it, why should they spend time reading your essay?
- **Specifics.** Anyone can say she is talented, innovative, enthusiastic, etc. Only details will prove it.
- **Engaging, organized, clear and concise prose.** The application is as much about your personality as it is about your writing skills. Have a clear beginning, middle, and end.
- **Reader-friendly** formatting. 1" margins. 10-12 point, standard font.

WHAT SHOULD I NOT INCLUDE?

- **Anything that won't fit into a manila folder.** You'll get attention with a stone tablet, but it's not the kind you want.
- **Clichés and imprecise statements.** Lots of lawyers "believe in justice" and are "hard workers."
- **Too much of anything:** humility, confidence, details...
- **Verbal "Fat":** wordy phrases ("the point I'm trying to make is that..."), excessive passive voice, etc...
- **Poor grammar, spelling errors.** These count a lot. Spend a lot of time revising; have plenty of other readers revise as well.
- **Information included elsewhere.** Don't re-list all your relevant coursework, extracurricular activities, honors and awards, etc... Expand and elaborate where appropriate, but don't simply restate.
- **Explanations** of any negative aspects of your application, such as bad grades one semester, should go in the brief addendum unless there it is part of a larger story that is in your personal statement.

I'VE GOT A DRAFT, NOW WHAT?

Now take a step back. **Reread, revise, reread, and revise again.** Ask a variety of other people to read your essay. What is engaging? What seems unnecessary? What isn't clear? Is my voice what I want to convey: confident, thoughtful, and authentic? Be aware of **risks** you are taking; humor, poetry, sarcasm, irony and other offbeat behaviors are risky. Consider carefully before choosing.

Once you are pleased with your content, begin the tedious process of proofreading. Like revising, your statement should be proofread many times by many different readers. For more help at any stage: visit the Writing and Speaking Tutorial Services for free, one-on-one tutorial services. Also download a handout graduate admissions from our website:

www.ncsu.edu/tutorial_center/writespeak