



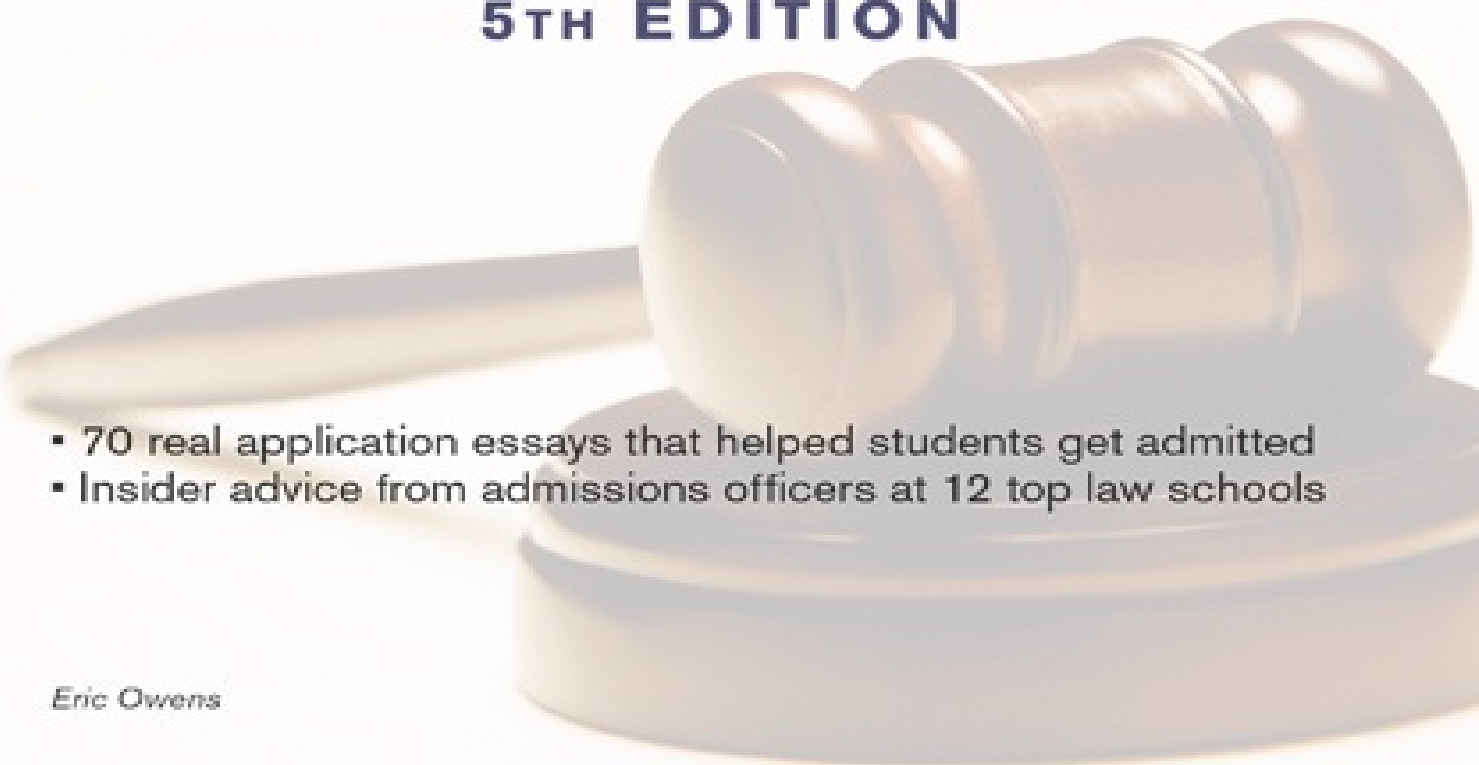
The
Princeton
Review



LAW SCHOOL ESSAYS

THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE

5TH EDITION

- 
- 70 real application essays that helped students get admitted
 - Insider advice from admissions officers at 12 top law schools

Eric Owens



LAW SCHOOL ESSAYS THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE

BY ERIC OWENS AND THE STAFF OF
THE PRINCETON REVIEW



Random House, Inc.
New York

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Framingham, MA 01701
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Cover art © Design Pics Inc. / Alamy

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The Princeton Review is not affiliated with Princeton University.

eBook ISBN: 978-0-307-94526-6
Paperback ISBN: 978-0-307-94525-9

Senior VP—Publisher: Robert Franek
Editor: Kristen O'Toole
Production: Best Content Solutions, LLC
Production Editor: Jessica Sauer

v3.1

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Ian Van Tuyl, Rob Tallia, and David Adam Hollander, Esq., who provide me with a solid foundation from which my understanding of the law school application process grew.

I also wish to thank John Katzman and Rob Franek for their support of my work and ideas.

I am grateful to my editor, Laura Braswell, for her counsel during my work on this manuscript.

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Introduction

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The first part of this book—you are reading it now—addresses how to write a great personal statement for your application to law school. There's no magic recipe, of course; nevertheless, if you follow our advice about what to put in and what to leave out, we're confident that you'll end up with a memorable personal statement that will differentiate you from the large applicant pool and make you a more competitive candidate.

The second part consists of interviews with the deans and directors of admissions at eight of the most selective law schools in the nation. Read what they have to say about the role that personal statements play in the admissions process. Their statements lend a human perspective to the sometimes harrowing law school admissions process.

The third part contains several unedited, unexpurgated personal statements written and submitted by actual law school applicants to a variety of selective law schools. You'll find that not every sentence is eloquent, nor every comma perfectly placed. These are the essays as they were submitted, read, and ultimately accepted. We think they're all solid. Some are excellent. More importantly, they've all passed the ultimate test for law school application soundness—their authors gained acceptance into at least one of the top law schools to which they applied.

It's important to note that the statements you'll find in these pages were written by students of diverse backgrounds and objectives. As with most collections of prose by a group of authors, this compilation may contain interesting or unexpected juxtapositions of ideas. The applicants whose work is featured in this book wrote about a variety of topics, including their relationships with family members, experiences in the working world, and difficulties with physical disabilities. There are some essays with somber themes and others that are more upbeat. You'll find accounts of achievement and stories of failure. These essays reveal a range of creativity and cleverness with the written word. Some are so good that they will intimidate you; others may hardly impress you. Some are strange; others will perhaps strike you as commonplace. No single type of essay is better than any other. We think you'll find, as we have, that the most memorable essays illuminate their writers. They are believable and perhaps relatable, but above all else, they're sincere.

Ideally, these personal statements will inspire you; supply you with paradigms for narrative and organizational structures; and teach you themes, illustrious words and phrases, and ways to express yourself that you hadn't considered, which will help you write exactly what you wish to communicate.

Of course, the personal statement doesn't stand alone. It has a place within the larger admissions context, and in this book, we show you the whole picture—including LSAT scores, undergraduate GPAs, work history, extracurricular involvement, and a complete list of admissions decisions for every single applicant whose essay you'll read. In this way, we hope to provide you with a thorough understanding of the relative selectivity of each of the top law

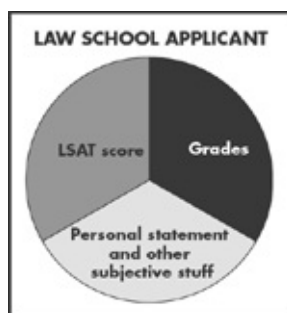
schools featured and of the admissions context in which the personal statement comes into play.

Finally, though it goes without saying: Don't plagiarize the personal statements in this book. That's worth repeating: **Do not plagiarize the statements you read in this book.** Different law schools ask different questions. Some simply ask for a personal statement. Others want you to answer several short essay questions in addition to writing a personal statement. Requested lengths will vary. We encourage you to note buzzwords, structures, and themes that you like. But draw the line at copying paragraphs, sentences, or even phrases. There's a chance you'll get caught and won't get into law school at all. Penalties notwithstanding, plagiarism is simply wrong, so don't do it. Period.

LAW SCHOOL ADMISSIONS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Law school admissions counselors say that they do not use a formula to determine which applicants to accept or reject. Insofar as nobody plugs all the parts of your application into a mathematical equation that generates decisions, it's true that there is no formula.

In the grand scheme of things, however, getting into law school comes down to a very basic set of requirements. Wherever you apply, your application will be divided into three roughly equal parts: your undergraduate grades (and your graduate school grades, if applicable); your LSAT score; and "the subjective stuff," which consists of your personal statement, your professional experience, and all the other intangibles that can't be measured numerically. It is this third part that keeps the law school admissions process from becoming an entirely predictable quantitative assessment.



THE ADMISSIONS INDEX

When evaluating your application, law schools will usually combine your grades and your LSAT score into an "index." The index is a number (which varies from school to school) that is made up of a weighted combination of your UGPA (undergraduate grade point average) multiplied by your LSAT score. Your LSAT score is often weighted more heavily than your UGPA. (After all, the LSAT serves as a standard by which admissions officers can reliably—some may argue, arbitrarily—compare the performance of one candidate with that of the applicant pool at large.) While the process differs from one school to another, it is generally the case that your index will put you into one of the three categories described below.

(Probably) Accepted. A select few applicants who have high LSAT scores and stellar GPAs are admitted virtually automatically. If your index is very, very strong as compared with the median or target index of the school to which you are applying, then you're as good as in.

(Probably) Rejected. If your index is very weak compared with the median or target index of the school to which you are applying, then you are probably going to be rejected without much to-do. When admissions officers consider an application with a weaker index, they'll be on the lookout for something outstanding or unique (like, say, **a truly outstanding personal statement**).

Well ... Maybe. The majority of applicants fall somewhere in the middle; the indexes of applicants in this group are right around the medians or target indexes of the schools to which they apply. Applicants in this category have satisfactory LSAT scores and GPAs, but the numbers are not high enough to merit virtually automatic admission. Many people fall into this category because they apply to schools they think they have at least a shot of getting into based on their grades and LSAT scores. That is to say, law school applicants tend to self-select. Harvard, for example, probably doesn't see many applicants who earned a 140 on the LSAT. What determines the fate of candidates whose applications hang in the balance? Well, law schools often consider the competitiveness of the undergraduate program. On the one hand, someone with a 3.3 GPA in an easy major at a school from which everybody graduates with a 3.3 or higher will face an uphill battle. On the other hand, someone with the same GPA in a difficult major from a school that has a reputation for being stingy with A's is in better shape. Admissions officers will also pore over the personal statement, letters of recommendation, and résumé for reasons to admit, reject, or waitlist "well ... maybe" candidates.

Nonquantitative factors are particularly important at law schools that receive applications from thousands of numerically qualified applicants. "Top Ten" law schools that receive ten or fifteen applications for every offer of admission that they make have no choice but to "look beyond the numbers." These elite schools may have thousands of fully qualified applicants but only a few hundred precious spots in their first-year classes. Their admissions offices will almost certainly have to turn away plenty of applicants with near-perfect LSAT scores and impressive college grades; the subjective stuff of applicants who advance past the initial cut will be scrutinized.

Somewhat less competitive schools also seek to identify capable individuals, some of whom may have relatively unimpressive GPAs and LSAT scores. The importance of the other components of the application (the personal statement perhaps chief among them) is greatly magnified for these students, as they must demonstrate their probable success in law school in more subjective ways.

THE LAW SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS: A CRASH COURSE

It's time-consuming, and it's not known for being fun. The LSAT alone can easily consume eighty or more hours of prep time, and a single application form may take as long as three hours if you take great care with the essay questions (as you should). You don't want to sabotage your efforts because of last-minute sloppiness, nor do you want to let this already tedious process become a gigantic burden. Our advice: Start early, and pace yourself.

WHEN TO APPLY

It really, **really** varies. If you apply to Stanford, your application must be submitted no earlier than September 15 and no later than February 1. If you apply to Duke, March 15 is your final deadline for submitting all materials. Boston College accepts applications for regular admission from mid-September until March 31, but the folks in admissions "urge you to submit your application well before the March 31 deadline." The University of Tennessee begins accepting applications on September 1 for the class that begins the following August. Applications may be filed throughout the year, but the "priority deadline" is February 15. At Loyola University Chicago School of Law, the priority deadline is March 1, and all supplementary documents must be received by March 31.

As a general rule, the longer you wait to apply to a school—regardless of its deadline—the worse your chances of getting into that school will be. No efficient admissions staff is going to wait for all the applications to arrive before starting to make selections. If you're reading this in December and hope to get into a law school for the fall but haven't done anything about it, you're not in the most favorable position. If you're happy with your LSAT score, you're in a somewhat better position. Your applications, however, will get to the law schools after the optimum time and may appear a bit rushed. The best course of action is to start early in the year, methodically take care of one thing at a time, and **finish by December**.

Early-notification options. Many schools have early-notification options, so you may know by the holiday season if you've been accepted. Naturally, early notifications entail early applications. For example, Duke University School of Law offers two rounds of binding early decision options with deadlines in mid-November and early January, respectively. Loyola University Chicago also has an early-notification program; applicants must submit all materials by January 15.

Applying early is a good idea for a few reasons. It can give you an indication of your chances of gaining admission to other schools; it can also relieve the stress of waiting until April (or June or August) to learn where you'll be spending the next three years of your life. Also, it's better to get waitlisted in December than in April (or whenever you would be notified for regular admission); if there is a "tie" among applicants on the waiting list, they'll probably admit whoever applied first. Of course, not every school has the same early-admission options. Some schools don't offer an early-admissions option at all.

Rolling admissions. "Rolling admissions" refers to a first-come-first-served admissions policy. Many law schools evaluate applications and notify applicants of admissions decisions throughout the course of several months (ordinarily from late fall to midsummer). Obviously, if you apply to one of these schools, it is vital that you apply as early as possible, because the

will be more places available at the beginning of the process than there will be later on.

THE BIG HURDLES

The application process is, as we mentioned, demanding. In that sense, it's an appropriate introduction to law school. Here are a few key tasks you will have to undertake as part of the process.

Take the LSAT. The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is a roughly four-hour exam. The LSAT is given in February, June, October (or, occasionally, late September), and December. It's divided into five thirty-five-minute multiple-choice sections and one thirty-minute writing section (which is neither given a numerical score by the Law School Admission Council [LSAC] nor always taken into consideration by law schools). All ABA-approved and most non-ABA-approved law schools in the United States and Canada require an LSAT score from each and every applicant.

LSAT Q&A

Q. Is there a limit to the number of times I can take the LSAT?

A. You may take the LSAT three times in any two-year period, and all scores remain on your record for five years.

Q. What happens if I have multiple LSAT scores?

A. Most top law schools average multiple LSAT scores.

Q. How many times should I take the LSAT?

A. If possible, just once. It is better to have one score that shows true ability than it is to have two that may elicit questions or compel interpretation.

Q. Can I cancel my scores?

A. Yes, you may cancel your scores—before you see them, of course. You can cancel your LSAT scores at the test center by completing the score-cancellation section of the LSAT answer sheet. You can also cancel your scores by sending a written cancellation request to LSAC within five days of taking the test. Note, however, that score reports will reflect that your score was canceled at your request.

Q. What is considered a good LSAT score?

A. A score that gets you into the schools to which you apply (and that you hope ultimately to attend) is a good LSAT score. In terms of what is considered “good” in general, more than 50 percent of test takers receive scores between 145 and 159, though this range represents less than one-quarter of the possible scaled scores. A score of about 160 or above would put you in an elite group.

Q. How far in advance do I need to register to take the LSAT?

A. Registration deadlines are typically one month before the test date, and late-registration deadlines are typically three weeks before the test date. That said, if you want to secure a place at a particular testing site, you should plan to register as early as possible. Otherwise, you may have to commute to take the LSAT.

Q. How much does the LSAT cost?

A. It costs \$127 to take the LSAT and receive one free score report. The late registration fee is an additional \$66. Further, subscription to the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS), which costs \$121, is required to apply to most law schools. Law school reports—which include test scores, LSAT writing-sample copies, transcripts, undergraduate academic summaries, and letters of recommendation—cost \$12 each. Applying to law school isn't cheap, but neither is attending law school. You'll reap the rewards in the quality of education you receive and, of course, in your future career as an attorney.

Complete applications from six or seven schools. Fairly early—like in July—select a couple of “reach” schools, a couple of schools to which you have a good shot at being accepted, and a couple of “safety” schools to which you are highly likely to be accepted. Your safety schools—if they are indeed true safety schools—will probably accept you quickly. It may take a while to get a final decision from the other schools, but you won't be totally panicked because you'll know your safety schools are there for you. If, for whatever reason, your UGPA or LSAT score is extremely low, you should apply to several safety schools.

Register for LSDAS

You can register for the Law School Data Assembly Service at the same time that you register to take the LSAT; all necessary forms can be found in the *LSAT/LSDAS Registration Information Book*. You can also register online at www.lsac.org.

Write your personal statement. Many schools will have open-ended prompts that simply say, in one variation or another, “Tell us about yourself.” It's critical, however, that you personalize each essay for every single law school to which you apply. In addition, some schools will ask you to write a few shorter essays along with your primary personal statement—yet another reason to select your schools fairly early.

Obtain two or three recommendations. Some schools require you to submit two recommendations, both of which must be academic. Other schools request more than two recommendations and want at least one of them to be from someone who knows you outside of traditional academic circles. (A handful of schools don't ask for recommendations at all, but this is the exception, not the rule.) As part of your LSDAS file, LSAC will accept up to three letters of recommendation on your behalf and will send those letters to all of the schools to which you apply.

Update/create your résumé. Most law school applications request a copy of your résumé. Make sure yours is up-to-date and suitable for submission to an academic institution. Put your academic credentials and experience first—no matter what they are and no matter how much professional experience you have. The résumé functions as a supplement to the rest of the material; it's probably the simplest part of the application process.

Get your academic transcripts sent to the LSDAS. When you subscribe to the Law School Data Assembly Service, you must request that the registrar at every undergraduate, graduate, and professional school that you ever attended send to them an official transcript. Do not attempt to send your own transcripts anywhere; law schools will consider them to be unofficial transcripts and **not** accept them. For this reason, it is imperative that you **make your transcript requests in August**. If you're applying for early decision, start sending for transcripts as early as May. Law schools will not make a decision without a complete file, and the LSDAS will not send your information to law schools without your transcripts. Undergraduate institutions occasionally delay the transcript process—sometimes even when students go there personally and pay them to provide the LSDAS with their records. Give yourself some time to fix any problems that may arise.

Write any necessary addenda. An addendum is a brief letter written to explain a deficiency in a portion of your application. If your personal and academic life has been fairly smooth, you won't need to include any addenda with your application. If, however, you were ever arrested, were put on academic probation, or have a low grade point average, you may need to write an addendum to explain the circumstances of your situation. Other legitimate addenda topics are low or discrepant LSAT scores, DUI/DWI suspensions, or any time gap in your academic or professional career. (See [this page](#) for more on addenda.)

Send in your seat deposit. Once you are accepted to a particular school, that school will ask you to send in a deposit. A typical fee runs for \$250 or more. This amount will be credited to your first-term tuition once you register for classes.

Do any other stuff. The law school application process is extensive, and accordingly, you may find that there are additional tasks beyond those just outlined. (You may wish to request a fee waiver, for example.) Keep a list of everything you need to take care of, and check off tasks as you accomplish them. Obtain a copy of the LSAC's *LSAT/LSDAS Registration and Information Book*, which is an invaluable resource for law school applicants. It has the forms you'll need, a sample LSAT, admissions information, the current Law Forum schedule, and sample application schedules. You can also find everything you'll need at www.lsac.org.

WRITING A GREAT PERSONAL STATEMENT

The personal statement often presents the only opportunity for you to differentiate yourself from the greater pool of applicants and to show that you can string more than a few sentences together. Sure, there's an essay on the LSAT, but it won't be taken anywhere nearly as seriously as your personal statement (though if it differs too substantially in quality

and style from your personal statement, it may raise a few red flags for admissions officers).

Your personal statement—together with your grades and LSAT score—is critically important to your law school application. Your statement should be about two or three pages in length (or the length specified in the prompt to which you are responding), and it should amount to something significantly more profound than “A six-figure salary really appeals to me,” or “Being a lawyer seems like a solid career move.” Your statement should provide the reader with insights into who you are—where you come from, where you’re going, and why you’ve chosen this path to get there—concisely and eloquently. You can accomplish this if you invest time and thought. Keep reading; we’ll show you how.

PERSONAL STATEMENT THEORY: EIGHT ESSENTIALS

1. Be professional, and always consider your audience. In your personal statement, you want to present yourself as intelligent, professional, mature, and persuasive. These are the qualities law schools seek in applicants. Moreover, these are the qualities that make good lawyers. The personal statement of a law school application (unlike the college application essay, for example) is not the place to discuss what your trip to Europe meant to you, to describe your wacky chemistry teacher, or try your hand at verse. While you want to stand out, you definitely don’t want to be considered immature or inappropriate.

Keep in mind the perspective of the reader as you craft your essay. Ultimately, you are offering a portrait of yourself in words to someone who doesn’t know you and who may never meet you, but who nevertheless has the power to make a very important decision about the course of your life. Remember that it’s a real person who will read your personal statement. Keep this person interested. Make them curious. Make them smile. Engage them intellectually. Properly orient this person so that he or she is at no point distracted from the content of your essay.

2. Demonstrate motive, and create a frame within which the reader can place you. It’s usually important to show why you want to go to law school. While you do not have to make your motivation for attending law school the central focus of your essay, you do want the admissions staff to come away with some understanding of why you want to commit three years of your life to codes and case law and to the practice of law many years thereafter.

Put yourself in a genuine context by explaining how your education, your personal and professional experiences, and the world around you have influenced you and your decision to attend law school. Give the admissions officers a frame of reference and real insight into the person you’ve become as a result of the experiences you’ve had. (If you do this well, the reader will understand why you want to attend law school without you having to explicitly state it.) Be open about yourself. Don’t just ramble on with clichés and platitudes. The more personal and individualized your personal statement is, the better received it will be. In a nutshell, admissions officers want you to communicate (in a clear, concise, grammatically accurate way) who you really are and what has made you the person you are today. They look for introspection and your ability to reflect intellectually upon yourself and upon the experiences that helped to develop your attitudes and beliefs. Admissions officers seek out

individuals who understand their own strengths, weaknesses, and limitations. They look for people who are aware of their own pasts and who have learned from their own mistakes. They look for candidates who have grown intellectually and professionally and who want to grow some more.

“What is written with effort is in general read without effort.”

—Samuel Johnson

3. Write clearly and succinctly, and get to the point within three pages unless there are unusual circumstances. Like any good writing, your law school application should be unambiguous and concise. Cut out excessive verbiage. Eschew obfuscation. Clarity and conciseness are usually the products of much careful reading, rereading (and rereading and rereading), and rewriting. Without question, repeated critical revision is the surest way to trim, fine-tune, and improve your prose.

Don't be long-winded and boring. Admissions officers don't typically like long personal statements. Most people who have unusual circumstances are those who are in their thirties or forties (or fifties or sixties) and therefore have more life experience. Unless you have particularly unusual circumstances that warrant (and merit) a longer essay, keep it brief. Moreover, regardless of the length, make certain that your personal statement is concise.

Details, Details, Details

We cannot stress enough the importance of proofreading. If in the personal statement that you submit to one school, you mention another, you will (rightfully) be pegged as careless in your attention to detail. Such imprecision can render your entire application unsuccessful. Lawyers need to be conscientious and circumspect—and so do you.

4. Tell the truth, and find your unique angle. Candor is the product of proper motivation. Honesty, sincerity, and authenticity cannot be superimposed after the fact; your writing must be candid from the outset. Do not try to fake candor (even if it's almost convincing). No matter how good your insincere personal statement may be, we're quite confident that an honest and authentic personal statement will be even better.

The admissions people read tons of really boring essays about “how great I am” and “why I think there should be justice for everyone.” Strive to find an angle that is interesting and unique to you. If what you write isn't interesting to you, we promise that it won't be even remotely interesting to an admissions officer. Not only will a unique and interesting essay be more effective; it will also be far more enjoyable to write. Who are you? Why are you different? What distinguishes you from others? Sometimes applicants want to answer the

question in a superficial way. They want to say, for example, “I am an Asian American from Missouri.” Expressed in such a general way, your background provides almost no insight into your character. If you choose to talk about your background in the context of how it has shaped your perspective and influenced your choices, that’s a different story. If you go the other route, however, remember to be highly specific; you do not want to be thought of as an applicant who was trying to fit into a preconceived notion of identity. Finally, you almost never need to mention the honors and awards you’ve received. After all, there’s a place for those on almost every law school application.

Don’t Write Defensively

Don’t apologize for not being extraordinary enough (whatever that means), for taking the admissions officer’s time, or for not being sufficiently creative or interesting. If you’re hoping that such professed humility will somehow excuse you from having to hold your reader’s interest, or if you think it hasn’t all been professed with varying degrees of *faux*-mility before, you are sadly mistaken. Don’t apologize for what you *aren’t*; tout all that you *are*. Every experience has something valuable and interesting to teach you. We recommend that you forego the defensive in favor of the interesting. You (not to mention the admissions officer reading your personal statement) will be much more satisfied with the result.

5. Devise a well-conceived narrative, and remember that good writing can (and will) be easily understood. Structural soundness is the product of a well-crafted outline. It really pays to sketch out the general themes of your personal statement first; worry about filling in the particulars later. Pay especially close attention to the structure of your personal statement and to the fundamental message it communicates. Your personal statement should flow seamlessly from beginning to end. Use paragraphs properly, and make sure the paragraphs are in logical order. The sentences within each paragraph should be complete and also in logical order.

You want to get your point across, not bury it in words. Your prose should be clear and direct. Don’t say in ten words what you can just as satisfactorily communicate in five—unless you have another clearly identifiable and worthy stylistic objective. If an admissions officer has to struggle to figure out what you are trying to say, you’ll be in trouble. Since legal-writing courses make up a significant part of most law school curricula, you will have a serious edge if you can demonstrate that you already possess impressive writing skills.

6. Avoid gimmicks, yet make yourself stand out. Do not make your personal statement into a poem, an epic, or anything besides standard prose. Anything other than standard prose is highly ineffective.

A solid, well-crafted essay will impress any admissions officer; however, if it reads like all the others, that admissions officer may not remember you. Yours will be just another personal statement and, as a result, you will present yourself as just another applicant. You don’t want

to be just another applicant, so seek to write something better than just another personal statement. You will be competing against thousands of well-qualified applicants for admission. Your primary task in writing your application is to separate yourself from the crowd. Admissions committees will read innumerable applications from bright twenty-two-year-old candidates with good grades. Particularly if you are applying directly from college, or if you have been out of school for a very short time, you must do your best to make sure the admissions committee doesn't lump you in with everyone else of similar age and credentials. Your essay presents an opportunity to put your unique set of credentials into context and distinguish yourself. Seize this opportunity! Keep in mind, however, that cheap tricks and gimmicks will make you stand out in a bad way. Sincerity is key here.

To Be or Not To Be?

Whenever possible, choose a verb that suggests a causal relationship instead of the linking verb **to be**. (The mantra: Don't equate when you can relate.) If someone **is** something, include that information in a modifier. Instead of, for example, "Jane Smith is a varsity basketball player," try, "A varsity basketball player, Jane Smith wins because she takes risky shots." Whenever possible, use the active voice in your sentences. Convey key information directly and succinctly.

7. Customize your statement for each school. You'll probably need to write only one basic personal statement, but you must make absolutely sure to make it specific (even if it's only ever-so-slightly specific) to each law school to which you apply. Law school admissions officers see a number of essays that have been written for some school other than theirs, and they hate that. Don't send the personal statement you wrote for your Fordham application to the University of Michigan. Pay extremely close attention to what each school is asking in the prompt for its personal statement, because there are probably some subtle (if not blinding) differences. Track each personal statement to make sure it goes to the right place.

Writer's Block?

What experiences have been the most meaningful and have most altered the course of your life? Try to express in a compelling manner some moment in your life, some experience you've had, or some intellectual slant on a personal interest. Try to relate this experience to your decision to attend law school.

8. Proofreading is absolutely essential—and so is total grammar and spelling accuracy. A thoughtful essay that offers true insight will stand out unmistakably, but if that essay is riddled with poor grammar and misspelled words, it will not receive serious consideration. Proofread your personal statement. Then proofread it again; then proofread it some more. Have three or four people read your personal statement from beginning to end and critique it. Read it aloud

(this really helps!). Ask friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, professors, brothers, sisters—anybody—to read your essay and comment on it. Do whatever it takes to make sure your personal statement is compelling, clear, concise, candid, and structurally sound.

It is critical that your essay be 100 percent grammatically correct. We just can't stress this enough. Do not misspell anything; use awkwardly constructed sentences, run-on sentences, or wrong verb tenses; misplace modifiers; or make a single error in punctuation. Make use of your spelling and grammar checks, but do not trust them to catch everything. Go back and read (and reread) your essay to ensure that you are submitting an example of your absolute best work.

In fact, making sure your writing is 100 percent grammatically accurate is so important that we've devoted a whole section to a review of the essential rules of good grammar and style. Even great writers can occasionally use a primer in the mechanics of good writing, and in order to crank out a great application essay, you're going to need to be able to apply all of these rules, with panache.

PAPER PERFECT

Whenever possible (or applicable), spring for the fancier thick paper. (But absolutely only purchase white paper.)

GOOD GRAMMAR = GOOD FORM

Think of each essay you write as a building. If it doesn't have structural integrity, law school admissions officers will tear through it with a wrecking ball.

Let's face it: You can write the most rip-roaring yarn this side of Clive Cussler, but without grammatical accuracy, it'll fall apart. A thoughtful essay that offers true insight will not receive serious consideration if it's riddled with poor grammar and misspelled words. It's critical that you avoid grammatical errors. We can't stress this enough. Misspellings, awkward constructions, run-on sentences, and misplaced modifiers cast doubt on your efforts, not to mention your intelligence.

MOST COMMON GRAMMAR MISTAKES

Chances are you know the difference between a subject and a verb. So we won't spend time here reviewing the basic components of English sentence construction (however, if you feel like you could use a refresher, check out our book, *Grammar Smart*). Instead we will focus on problems of usage.

Below is a brief overview to the seven most common usage errors among English speakers. These are errors we all make (some more than others), and knowing what they are will help you snuff them out in your own writing.

A Good Book

Buy and read *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. We can't recommend it highly enough. This little book is a requisite investment for any writer (and believe us, you'll be doing plenty of writing as a law student and practicing attorney). You will constantly refer to it, and your writing will improve as a result.

Mistake #1: Misplaced Modifier

A modifier is a descriptive word or phrase inserted into a sentence to add dimension to the thing it modifies. For example:

Because he could talk, Mr. Ed was a unique horse.

Because he could talk is the modifying phrase in the sentence. It describes a characteristic of Mr. Ed. Generally speaking, a modifying phrase should be right next to the thing it modifies. If it's not, the meaning of the sentence may change. For example:

Every time he goes to the bathroom outside, John praises his new puppy for being so good.

Who's going to the bathroom outside? In this sentence, it's John! There are laws against that. The descriptive phrase *every time he goes to the bathroom outside* needs to be near *puppy* for the sentence to say what it means.

When you are writing sentences that begin with a descriptive phrase followed by a comma, make sure that the thing that comes after the comma is the person or thing being modified.

Mistake #2: Pronoun Agreement

As you know, a pronoun is a little word that is inserted to represent a noun (*he, she, it, they, etc.*). Pronouns must agree with their nouns: The pronoun that replaces a singular noun must also be singular, and the pronoun that replaces a plural noun must be plural.

During your proofreading, be sure your pronouns agree with the nouns they represent. The most common mistake is to follow a singular noun with a plural pronoun (or vice versa), as in the following:

If a writer misuses words, they will not do well on the state exam.

The problem with this sentence is that the noun ("writer") is singular, but the pronoun ("they") is plural. The sentence would be correctly written as follows:

If a writer misuses words, he or she will not do well on the state exam.

Or

If writers misuse words, they will not do well on the state exam.

This may seem obvious, but it is also the most commonly violated rule in ordinary speech. How often have you heard people say, *The class must hand in their assignment before leaving?* Class is singular. But *their* is plural. Class isn't the only tricky noun that sounds singular but is actually plural. Following is a list of "tricky" nouns—technically called collective nouns. These are nouns that typically describe a group of people but are considered singular and therefore need a singular pronoun:

Family

Jury

Group

Team

Audience

Congregation

United States

If different pronouns are used to refer to the same subject or one pronoun is used to replace another, the pronouns must also agree. The following pronouns are singular:

Either

Neither

None

Each

Anyone

No one

Everyone

If you are using a pronoun later in a sentence, double-check to make sure it agrees with the noun/pronoun it is replacing.

Mistake #3: Subject-Verb Agreement

The rule regarding subject-verb agreement is simple: singular with singular, plural with plural. If you are given a singular subject (*he, she, it*), then your verb must also be singular (*is, has, was*).

Sometimes you may not know if a subject is plural or singular, making it tough to determine whether its verb should be plural or singular. (Just go back to our list of collective nouns that sound plural but are really singular).

Subjects joined by *and* are plural:

Bill and Pat *were* going to the show.

However, nouns joined by *or* can be singular or plural—if the last noun given is singular, then it takes a singular verb; if the last noun given is plural, it takes a plural verb.

Bill or Pat *was* going to get tickets to the show.

When in doubt about whether your subjects and verbs agree, trim the fat! Cross out all the prepositions, commas, adverbs, and adjectives separating your subject from its verb. Stripping the sentence down to its component parts will allow you to quickly see whether your subjects and verbs are in order.

Mistake #4: Verb Tense

As you know, verbs come in different tenses—for example, *is* is present tense, while *was* is past tense. The other tense you need to know about is “past perfect.”

Past perfect refers to some action that happened in the past and was completed (perfected) before another event in the past. For example:

I had already begun to volunteer at the hospital when I discovered my passion for medicine.

You’ll use the past perfect a lot when you describe your accomplishments to admissions officers. For the most part, verb tense should not change within a sentence (e.g., switching from past to present).

Mistake #5: Parallel Construction

Remember this from your SATs? Just as parallel lines line up with one another, parallelism means that the different parts of a sentence line up in the same way. For example:

Jose told the career counselor his plan: he will be taking the GMAT, attend business school, and become a CEO.

In this sentence, Jose is going to *be taking*, *attend*, and, *become*. The first verb, *be taking*, is not written in the same form as the other verbs in the series. In other words, it is not parallel. To make this sentence parallel, it should read:

Jose told the career counselor his plan: he will take the GMAT, attend business school, and become a CEO.

It is common to make errors of parallelism when writing sentences that list actions or items. Be careful.

Mistake #6: Comparisons

When comparing two things, make sure that you are comparing what can be compared. Sound like double-talk? Look at the following sentence:

Larry goes shopping at Foodtown because the prices are better than Shoprite.

Sound okay? Well, sorry—it's wrong. As written, this sentence says that the prices at Foodtown are better than Shoprite—the entire store. What Larry means is that the prices at Foodtown are better than the *prices* at Shoprite. You can only compare like things (prices to prices, not prices to stores).

The English language uses different comparison words when comparing two things than when comparing more than two things. Check out these examples:

more (for two things) vs. **most** (for more than two)

Ex.: Given Alex and David as possible dates, Alex is the *more* appealing of the two.

In fact, of all the guys I know, Alex is the *most* attractive.

less (for two things) vs. **least** (for more than two)

Ex.: I am *less* likely to be chosen than you are.

I am the *least* likely person to be chosen from the department.

better (for two things) vs. **best** (for more than two)

Ex.: Taking a cab is *better* than hitchhiking.

My organic chemistry professor is the *best* professor I have ever had.

between (for two things) vs. **among** (for more than two)

Ex.: Just *between* you and me, I never liked her anyway.

Among all the people here, no one likes her.

Keep track of what's being compared in a sentence so you don't fall into this grammatical black hole.

Mistake #7: Diction

Diction means choice of words. There are tons of frequently confused words in the English language. They can be broken down into words that sound the same but mean different things (*there, they're, their*), words and phrases that are made up (*irregardless*), and words that are incorrectly used as synonyms (*fewer, less*).

Words that sound the same but mean different things are homonyms. Some examples are

there, they're, their: *There* is used to indicate a location in time or space. *They're* is a

contraction of “they are.” *Their* is a possessive pronoun.

effect/affect: *Effect* is the result of something. *Affect* is to influence or change something.

conscience/conscious: *Conscience* is Freudian, and is a sense of right or wrong. *Conscious* is to be awake.

principle/principal: *Principle* is a value. *Principal* is the person in charge at a school.

eminent/imminent: *Eminent* describes a person who is highly regarded. *Imminent* means impending.

Imaginary words that don't exist but tend to be used in writing include:

Alot: Despite widespread use, *alot* is not a word. *A lot* is the correct form.

Irregardless: *Irregardless* is not in anybody's dictionary—it's not a real word. *Regardless* is the word that you want.

Sometimes people don't know when to use a word. How often have you seen this sign?

Express checkout: Ten items or less.

Unfortunately, supermarkets across America are making a blatant grammatical error when they post this sign. When items can be counted, you must use the word *fewer*. When something cannot be counted, you would use the word *less*. For example:

If you eat fewer French fries, you can use less ketchup.

Here are some other words people make the mistake of using interchangeably:

number/amount: Use *number* when referring to something that can be counted. Use *amount* when it cannot.

aggravate/irritate: *Aggravate* and *irritate* are not synonymous. To *aggravate* is to make worse. To *irritate* is to annoy.

disinterested/uninterested: *Disinterest* means impartiality: absence of strong feelings about something, good or bad. To be *uninterested*, on the other hand, indicates boredom.

Diction errors require someone to cast a keen, fresh eye on your essay because they trip your ear and require focused attention to catch.

Here's a handy chart to help you remember the most common grammar usage errors:

- [click 59 Minutes.pdf](#)
- [Second Person Singular here](#)
- [read online Cruel Doubt](#)
- [read Terrorism and Counterintelligence: How Terrorist Groups Elude Detection \(Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare\) online](#)
- [Relationship Rescue: A Seven-Step Strategy for Reconnecting with Your Partner.pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)

- <http://sidenoter.com/?ebooks/Science-in-the-Kitchen-and-the-Art-of-Eating-Well--Lorenzo-Da-Ponte-Italian-Library-.pdf>
- <http://aircon.servicessingaporecompany.com/?lib/The-Stone-Witch--Dark-Hunter--Book-5-.pdf>
- <http://qolorea.com/library/Public-Private-Partnerships--Managing-Risks-and-Opportunities.pdf>
- <http://toko-gumilar.com/books/Terrorism-and-Counterintelligence--How-Terrorist-Groups-Elude-Detection--Columbia-Studies-in-Terrorism-and-Irregu>
- <http://creativebeard.ru/freebooks/Relationship-Rescue--A-Seven-Step-Strategy-for-Reconnecting-with-Your-Partner.pdf>