CREATING A KILLER LAW SCHOOL APPLICATION
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CHOOSING YOUR TARGET LAW SCHOOLS

The law school application process begins and ends with critical decisions about where to attend law school. First, you need to identify a handful of schools to which you will apply. Later, after admissions decisions are made, you must determine which school to attend. Each school offers a unique complement of services and features, so you should spend time gathering reliable information so that you can successfully identify the schools best suited to your individual goals.

You have your work cut out for you: As of September 2014 there were 204 law schools approved by the American Bar Association. There are three important considerations when it comes to deciding which school to attend: cost of attendance, job placement and educational quality.

Cost

According to a recent Government Accountability Office report, most law students graduate with more than $100K in debt. This type of debt can severely limit your career options after law school (instead of pursuing your passion for public interest, you can’t afford not to work for a big private law firm instead) or your lifestyle (get ready for more Cup-O-Noodles!), so it’s important that you start thinking about ways you can begin your legal career with minimal debt.

The downturn in law school applications pits law schools against one another for qualified candidates. This means there has not been a better time to apply to law school because not only are you more likely to get into your “dream” school, but you are also likely to get wooed with scholarships from other schools vying for your consideration.

There is a tension here—you want to get the best deal so you can graduate with minimal debt, but you do not want to sacrifice post-graduate professional opportunities by simply choosing the least expensive school. Before making your final decision, you must determine if the added cost (or savings) will enhance (or limit) the professional opportunities after graduation.
Job Placement

You may think it’s too early to think about where you will ultimately wish to practice, but it’s not. All too often, students may choose a school that offers the best deal without realizing that a degree from that institution may not be as valuable to their own needs as they may think. When considering which law school to attend, make a list of the geographic areas (e.g., New York City, Washington, DC, Charlotte, NC, etc.) where you may like to settle. Then—like any good consumer—call the career placement offices at your selected schools and ask what percentage of last year’s graduates obtained employment in those regions. This will give you a good idea about how portable a degree from that law school is.

Additionally, scour the job placement numbers reported by the various schools that offer you a spot. Consider things like median salary, employability percentages and judicial clerkship opportunities. It would be unfortunate to pass on a law school where your chances of employment and earning potential are higher, simply because you opted for a full- or partial-tuition scholarship from another school.

Educational Quality

Educational quality is also an important consideration in choosing a law school. To assess the quality of a school, many students consult several annual law school rankings that attempt to measure the quality of education. For instance, US News & World Report’s Law School Rankings, published every March, compares law schools using categories such as: average student LSAT scores; average student undergraduate GPA; student/faculty ratios; application acceptance rates; graduate placement success rates; faculty resources; bar passage rates; and academic reputation among lawyers, judges, and law professors.

The USNEWS law school rankings and its underlying methodology have received their fair share of criticism over the years. For example, in 2009, reports by the Law School Admissions Council and the Government Accountability Office criticize law school rankings for forcing some schools to “game” the system and employ questionable admissions tactics to improve (or at least maintain) their USNEWS ranking.

A popular alternative to the US News ranking is the Educational Quality Ranking (EQR), published by Brian Leiter, a University of Chicago law professor. Unlike US News, EQR focuses exclusively on three factors when determining its rankings: quality of the faculty, quality of the student body, and quality of the teaching. A few law school deans have praised EQR as a favorable alternative to the US News rankings. For a side-by-side comparison of both the US News Law School Rankings and Leiter Rankings, you can visit AdmissionsDean.com.

Most rankings systems neglect other significant factors, including the racial and gender diversity of a school’s student body; the location of the school; the cost of tuition and availability of loan repayment assistance programs; average class size; variety of course offerings; availability of clinical and externship programs; availability of part-time and evening programs; commitment to technology; access to faculty; alumni support; and more. Be sure to consider these factors when choosing which law school is right for you.

The choice is yours. You now have the method to steer you in the right direction to make that critical decision. What school options will leave you with minimal debt, but also put you in an attractive position for future job placement? Which school offers the best educational quality for you? It is a tough decision, but considering the above carefully will help guide you towards the most optimal decision.
THE ROLE OF THE LSAT AND UGPA IN ADMISSIONS

In the law school admission process, there are two numbers that play a dominant role in determining where you are admitted: your LSAT score and your UGPA. Let’s briefly look at each.

A Brief Overview of the LSAT

The Law School Admission Test, or LSAT, is the test required for admission to any law school accredited by the American Bar Association. Since it is the test to get into law school, you might think the LSAT would test your knowledge of the law, but it does not. Instead, the LSAT attempts to measure the abilities and skills you will need to succeed in law school and as a lawyer.

According to LSAC, the producers of the test, the LSAT is designed “to measure skills that are considered essential for success in law school: the reading and comprehension of complex texts with accuracy and insight; the organization and management of information and the ability to draw reasonable inferences from it; the ability to think critically; and the analysis and evaluation of the reasoning and arguments of others.”

How do they measure these skills? By using various types of questions, each designed to test specific abilities.

Let’s look at the sections that make up an LSAT:

- Two scored sections of Logical Reasoning (short arguments, 24-26 questions in each section)
- One scored section of Reading Comprehension (three long reading passages, 2 short comparative reading passages, 26-28 total questions)
- One scored section of Analytical Reasoning (four logic games, 22-24 total questions)
- One unscored experimental section of one of the above three section types (the experimental section is not specified as such, and there is no way to determine which section is experimental during the test)
- You are given 35 minutes to complete each of the 5 sections, with a break of 10 to 15 minutes between the 3rd and 4th sections. An unscored writing sample is administered at a later date via LSAC’s online platform.

Note that while this writing section is unscored, law schools will receive a copy of the writing section with your score report.

The typical LSAT takes about 4 hours to complete, and you normally receive your scores back within three weeks. To register for the test, visit lsac.org.
A Brief Overview of your UGPA

Your Undergraduate Grade Point Average (UGPA) is based on your grades from your undergraduate years of college. These grades come from your official school transcripts, which are processed by LSAC’s Credential Assembly Service (CAS) and then distributed to each law school to which you apply.

When you submit your grades to CAS, they standardize the results onto a 0.0 to 4.0 scale, and release a variety of results, including your cumulative GPA, undergraduate GPA, and GPA within your major. The undergraduate GPA is the most important of these figures (and more important than a graduate GPA, if you have one).

The Importance of the LSAT and UGPA in Law School Admissions

You may be surprised to learn that your LSAT score and UGPA are the two most important factors in determining which law schools will offer you admission. In fact, at many schools, your LSAT and UGPA are combined by a formula that produces a single “index number” for each candidate. When candidates are examined, the individuals with the highest index numbers are considered first. The influence of this index is so important that LSAC even has an online tool where you can input your LSAT score and UGPA and receive an assessment approximating your percentage chances of getting in to each school.

Of course, your LSAT score and undergraduate GPA are not the only factors that admissions committees will examine, but they will typically outweigh your personal statement, work history, and recommendations. Why is this the case? Because they provide hard numbers with which to compare students (as opposed to the “soft” factors involved in personal statements and recommendations) and because the LSAT allows for all applicants to be compared across a single objective scale.

So, if you are currently in college, make sure that you maximize your grades in your remaining courses. And, even though your UGPA may be largely determined at the point, the LSAT is still within your control. Use this information to your advantage: if your GPA is below the median for the school of your choice, a relatively good LSAT score could make you more competitive, and if your GPA is well above the median for your dream school, a relatively high score on the LSAT could help earn you a spot (and perhaps a scholarship!).

How to Prepare for the LSAT

Because your UGPA is the product of four or more years of work, it is difficult to change that number in a short period of time. The LSAT, on the other hand, is much easier to change since it is only a single four-hour test.

Fortunately, everyone can be trained to understand the logic of the LSAT, although various learning styles necessitate different approaches to preparing. Some students learn effectively working with books or tests on their own, while others benefit from the interaction of a live lecture. An online course can be a great option for some, while others seek the assistance of a personal tutor. In deciding what will work best for you, start by considering your particular learning style.

Note that the different approaches can vary significantly in cost. Books are typically the least expensive option, but you have to be motivated to study and be a good self-learner. Courses are more expensive but they often provide a lot of material, along with a set schedule and general study plan. Tutoring tends to be the most expensive approach but it is completely personalized and focused solely on your needs, which can make this approach an efficient one.

However you choose to approach the LSAT, make sure you perform as well as possible. And if you can combine a good LSAT score with a solid GPA, you’ll be in great shape at law school decision time.
THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

1. Use Your Own Voice

This is about the tone of your essay.

The point of the personal statement is for the reader to like you and want to pass you in the halls everyday for the next three years, so keep that in mind as you write that very first draft. It’s important to be likeable and to create the impression that you will be an alumnus who will reflect well on the law school.

Don’t try to sound how you think a personal statement should sound, and certainly (please!) don’t try to write one of those cheesy personal statements you saw in some book of sample law school personal statements. I always advise my clients to attempt the first draft as though they are speaking the words instead of writing them.

This is not an academic paper, and if you try to write how you expect lawyers to write, (using lots of big words) you’ll just make a fool of yourself. A good personal statement allows the reader to get to know you and to like you, and this means taking a conversational (but not too informal) tone. A successful personal statement lets the reader get to know the writer.

2. Surprise the Reader

By the time someone reads your personal statement, she will already know your GPA, LSAT, work history, honors, awards, activities, etc. What might that person assume about you from this information? Really think critically about yourself (just not to the point where you make yourself paranoid).

Will your transcripts make you look lazy? If so, tell a story that shows how hard working and focused you are. Likewise, if your transcripts show you’re a near-perfect student, and you have the LORs and resume to back it up, then share something surprising in the personal statement by getting personal. Show them you’re more than what they think you are. If you graduated college in 3 years and you’re 21, demonstrate maturity. If you went to fancy private schools, recount tales of how you competed for scholarships and worked as a bartender to pay your bills. If you appear to be the typical fraternity guy or jock, share your love of reading or museums.

However, this approach only works if the story you’re telling is true, because admission committees who have read tens of thousands of personal statements can spot the B.S. pretty quickly.
3. Avoid Conclusions

A good personal statement never says “I am a hard worker,” or “I overcame obstacles,” or “I never quit.” Rather, it tells a story that convinces the reader to come to the conclusion(s) on his/her own. How do you do this? By providing facts and telling a true story that shows the conclusion you’re trying to prove. This is how you succeed on law school exams as well, and the best way for a lawyer to make an effective argument is to use the facts of the case; start with your law school personal statement.

One of my pet peeves when I was reviewing law school applications as director of admissions was reading statements like “My strong work ethic…” and then not really learning anything remarkable about that person’s work ethic. This is the time to share that you held two jobs in college and went to a professor’s office hours weekly to catch up with the grad students enrolled in the 500-level course and how you worked like crazy to earn that B- and it was one of your best accomplishments.

If you provide persuasive facts, the reader will make the right conclusion naturally.

4. Consider Your Content

Some topics that have become trite and overused include:

A. The injured athlete story—“It was difficult to leave the team after I worked so hard for so many years…”;

B. The typical study abroad story—“I learned to drive on the wrong side and to use chopsticks…”;

C. Current historical events—“Obama’s rise to the nomination inspires me…”; and

D. High school events—“In high school, I was a championship softball player and earned 6 AP credits.” (High school can be appropriate to mention if there’s a specific episode that provides a point you’re trying to make such as “My parents divorced during my junior year of high school, and suddenly I learned I would have to bear the cost of college myself…as a result I worked 30 hours a week during my freshman year…”)

I think there is a misconception that personal statements must be about overcoming paralysis or poverty. You don’t have to apologize for having a privileged life—just show what does make you interesting/different/remarkable. Some of my clients have distinguished themselves in non-traditional ways by doing things they never even considered mentioning in their law school personal statements. One has a huge readership on her crafts blog. Another ran an online gaming community. Don’t underestimate what you have going for you.

Do not reuse your college personal statement wherein you contemplated lumps of peanut butter. Stay away from anything that will make you appear to be high maintenance, such as recounting the time you fought the dean of students about the professor who had a grudge against you because you were late to her class once.
5. Use Your Words Wisely

Spell correctly.

Punctuate correctly.

Don’t use ten words when three will do. (Sorry if I’m quoting “Ocean’s 11” here.)

Think about what you’re writing—there is no reason to start with “My name is…” when your name is at the top of the paper. Refrain from repeating things that the reader will already know about you (job descriptions, awards won, etc.).

There is no reason to use certain words. For example, “personally”—it is a personal statement; it had better be personal (again, sorry for the “When Harry Met Sally” reference). Same goes for “unique” and “In conclusion.” Also, don’t mention a law school’s name unless you’re going to say something specific about the school that is meaningful.

Lastly, just because Boalt says you can write four pages doesn’t mean you should stretch things out to fit four pages. You get bonus points for being succinct.

6. Trust Your Judgment

Of course, it’s a good idea to have another set of eyes on your personal statement before you submit it; after you look at something a hundred times, it’s hard to spot the errors yourself. However, be careful about passing your essay around to lawyers and English professors and parents and friends. A personal statement is such a different type of writing and its purpose is so specific that unless someone has had experience making law school admission decisions, they probably have only read one personal statement—their own.

Your informal advisors will probably expect that you should spend your essay talking about how your parents told you at age four that your negotiating skills were evident and that you are a top public speaker and your friends always seek your advice. Be strong enough to decide against taking certain advice. And, if you decide to seek professional assistance with your law school personal statement, find someone who has actually made law school admission decisions and can give you an honest assessment of your content, presentations, writing, and overall application.
TOP 15 LAW SCHOOL LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION TIPS

1. Assume that schools prefer academic recommendations unless they specifically request a professional one. An academic recommender is someone who has taught you in a college classroom environment, graded your papers, led your discussion sections, etc.

2. Law school recommendations are not meant to be character references; they should focus on you as a student. Any thoughts they share about you outside the classroom are just bonuses; they are not required or expected. Recommendations are also not expected to discuss other parts of your application, like your extracurricular activities while in college.

3. Less is more. Have good reasons for submitting more than the required number of recommendations. In fact, have a good reason for submitting anything as part of your application that isn’t required.

4. Use LSAC’s Credential Assembly Service to submit your recommendations for your applications. When the online system asks whether you’re submitting a “recommendation” or an “evaluation,” select “recommendation.”

5. The longer you’ve been out of school, the less admissions officers expect to see an academic recommendation, and the more appropriate it is to submit a professional one. Keep an eye out for the exceptional schools that do prefer a professional recommendation; they will tell you so in their application instructions.

6. The recommender’s job title is never more important than the closeness of the relationship. The Teaching Assistant might have more meaningful things to say about you as a student than the name-brand professor does. Recommendations from famous people, politicians, or other VIPs are useless; don’t bother.

7. Recommendations should be mainly backward-looking, offering an opinion on you as the recommender’s student (or employee, if a professional recommendation). Recommenders are not expected to predict how you’re going to fare as a law student in particular, or as a future lawyer, but they are expected to know your past academic work in their class well enough to assess your academic qualities.
8. Anecdotes and stories make a recommendation memorable. A bunch of adjectives, even superlative ones, do not. If a recommender invites your input or guidance, ask her to give examples that back up her opinions. It also helps if she can put you in the context of the other students she has taught.

9. Never ask to see a draft. If recommenders ask for your input, it’s great to give them input. If they show you a draft, you are absolutely allowed to see it even if you’ve signed the waiver on the application form, but never give recommenders the impression that you expect to see what they have written about you.

10. It’s always a good idea to prep your recommenders. You can help them understand your motivations for pursuing law school (you want to signal to them that you have thought through this big decision, and that you are not applying to law school just because it’s the path of least resistance). Help them understand in broad strokes how you are positioning yourself in your application.

11. When requesting recommendations, give your recommenders an “out.” If they express any hesitation, move on and find someone who is enthusiastic about writing you a meaningful letter.

12. Do not write your own letter, even if a recommender asks you to (“draft it and I’ll sign it”). Admissions officers would not consider that ethical or useful, and even if it were, self-written letters tend not to be very good. (Try writing one sometime. Unless you are a narcissist, it’s hard to say truly stand-out things about yourself. And you can’t read your recommender’s mind or write in his voice in any event.)

13. Be mindful that you are asking recommenders to spend some of their reputational capital on you. Don’t abuse that courtesy.

14. The most important thing for you to do is pick the appropriate recommenders and guide them as requested. After that, it’s out of your hands. Give them a deadline to submit their letters — at least six weeks before you want your applications to be complete (four weeks for them to write the letter, two for LSAC to process it). Your LSAC account will show when each letter has been received. Follow up with any tardy recommenders as soon as possible after the deadline you have given them.

15. After you know where you will be starting law school, follow up with your recommenders and thank them. They are part of your network, and they actually care about your success. Stay in touch.
Extra-curriculars don’t matter.

We’re sure you have heard this law school admissions trope repeated to you by casual observers of the law school admissions process. Simply put, these people are unequivocally wrong. If they were right, admissions officers would have been replaced long ago by computers that calculate the several thousand applicants’ GPA and LSAT scores on a numerical index and print out decisions. Now that we have that out of the way, let’s get back to talking about extra-curriculars.

As you probably anticipated, we were being a bit facetious in saying that extra-curricular activities do not matter. They do. What matters more than the extra-curricular activity, though, is you. Your extra-curricular involvement should be an extension of yourself; it should both advance and reflect your interests, passions, hobbies, skills, and aspirations. As you have almost certainly heard elsewhere, breadth of extra-curricular involvement can be good, but depth is almost always better. Being busy for the sake of being busy is never going to impress an admissions officer. Even if you are the most prodigiously productive student in the history of law school admissions, what you are doing has to make sense in the context of your candidacy for law school. Of course, having depth and breadth of extra-curricular engagement would be optimal.

Debate, student government, mock trial, moot court, student publications, and Model United Nations are all conventional extra-curricular activities that can boost your candidacy for law school. However, if there were one sentence in this article that we wish you would forget we ever said, it would be the previous sentence.

While there are a handful of extra-curricular activities like these that hone the core set of skills that are crucial to success in law school, these activities or experiences should be considered merely a means to an end. In short, what matters is that your extra-curricular activities evince a passion for the law or the constituent skills that engender “good lawyering.” Activities that showcase an applicant’s sound character and judgment, independence of thought, analytical ability, effectiveness of oral and written communication, leadership ability, and personal initiative are always valuable additions to a resume or CV. Remember, unlike undergraduate institutions, law schools do not need to fill spots in orchestras or sports teams, so they do not need to look for that particular brand of diversity of extracurricular interests and skill, except insofar as they are ancillary indicia of an otherwise strong candidate.
Advising students on the “best” extra-curricular activities is a highly context-dependent exercise. For instance, it would not make much sense for someone interested in facilitating large real estate development deals and financings from the legal side to participate in mock trial or moot court for four years in college. That type of candidate should instead concentrate on credentialing herself in a manner that reflects that interest; for instance, she might set out to get some sort of certification in commercial and/or residential appraisals, obtain a real estate license, form a real estate investment club with like-minded peers with a prominent real estate attorney as a mentor, work for a developer or a financial institution’s loan origination department, and write for a financial journal on campus.

Similarly, an undergraduate biochemist taking all traditionally “pre-med” courses who has his eyes set on law school might be advised to focus exclusively on his scholarship as long as it is truly advancing the scholarship in that area in a meaningful fashion and that can be validated by his recommenders. Granted, such a strategy is difficult to execute; but if presented cogently in the application materials such that the connection between law and science makes sense to the admissions reader, it can be very effective.

Some of the most successful applications are those in which a candidate demonstrated that he or she has thrived in activities or experiences that demand excellence in one or more of these areas, but are not the same worn-out “pre-law”-type activities that law school admissions officers see over and over again. This is not to discourage applications with more conventional experiences and backgrounds, but instead to encourage candidates to genuinely put as much energy and thought into preparing a coherent and compelling application theme as they would to preparing for the LSAT.

Think outside the box with your extra-curricular activities and experiences. Sometimes, they will only be loosely “extra-curricular” in the traditional sense of the word which implies they take place alongside the academic curriculum. For instance, some students play leadership roles in their communities as undergraduates by doing impressive things like starting organizations outside of school. One poignant example of such a student was a Harvard student applying to Yale Law School several years ago who had served on the city council in Cambridge. Certain extra-curricular activities like this might not tell us as much as about your potential for success in law school, but convey what kind of community member you will be when you are eventually a member of the bar.

Our parting advice is that applicants should consider the law school application an admissions test of its own. Instead of serving as a yardstick for logical reasoning, analytical reasoning, and reading comprehension like the LSAT, the application offers admissions officers the opportunity to evaluate your ability to craft a nuanced compelling argument for your own admission on the basis of your life’s work and experiences. The latter—exhibiting the maturity and sophistication to understand and evaluate yourself and cogently communicate your own value to the incoming class of a target law school—is often just as effective of a barometer for success in law school and a legal career thereafter as any standardized test; at very least, it is undeniably an incredibly important part of the evaluation process.
DEALING WITH NEGATIVES ON YOUR LAW SCHOOL APPLICATION

You’ve taken the LSAT, registered with LSAC, talked with your professors about letters of recommendation, and now you are ready to apply to your dream law school. But wait—your LSAT score isn’t as stellar as you had hoped it would be? Your grades are low? You have been out of school for a year and haven’t done anything useful with your time? You have a disciplinary or criminal record (and you aren’t sure whether it is public)? Rare is the student who has a “perfect” application. Let’s talk about how to deal with real-life negatives on your real-life law school application.

Low LSAT Score

What can you do if your LSAT score is lower than the median for the schools to which you plan to apply? The answer depends on your timing, but the simple response is: raise your score! If it is October, and you’ve just received your September LSAT score, then take the time to study and re-take the exam in December. Although you can receive a boost from applying early, it is not nearly as helpful as the increased chance of admission you will enjoy with a significant jump in your LSAT score. If you did not invest in a test preparation course the first time, spend the time and money now to take a course, study more, hire a tutor, or whatever else you need to do to improve your score.

If it is later in the admissions season and you still don’t have a high enough score to make it into the schools of your choice, you may wish to delay applying an admissions cycle until you have put in the time to improve your score. Remember that not only admissions decisions but also scholarship money are in play when you are dealing with your LSAT scores. The LSAT is a learnable test, and with enough time, you can improve your performance.

Low GPA

As with a low LSAT score, a GPA below the median for your target school can stand in the way of your admission. If you are a college senior and need a higher GPA to have a good chance of being admitted to your top choice law school, strongly consider delaying your application one admissions cycle. Two semesters of higher grades can significantly raise your overall GPA and make the difference in gaining acceptance and receiving needed scholarship money.

If you are already out of school, consider where your weaknesses lie. If, for example, you have a quantitative background, highlight your written and verbal skills by emphasizing relevant extracurricular activities (debate club, anyone?). If your overall GPA is lower than the median but you performed well in your major, ensure that your recommender can point out your proficiencies and rave about your passion and intellect.
Character and Fitness

Some applications only ask about whether you have been criminally indicted or charged; others request information regarding any arrest, minor infraction or even school disciplinary history. Make sure you understand exactly what you are being asked. Do not assume that if an infraction was far in the past or “sealed” that you do not need to disclose it. You can and should obtain all records from the incident, as you will eventually need them for admission to the bar. If you are unsure, seek advice from an outside source. In fact, you may wish to call the state bar where you wish to practice in order to ensure that your background will not interfere with admission to the bar. And when in doubt: disclose. Many state bars will request a copy of your law school application. If there is a discrepancy between what you disclose there and what you disclose in your bar application, that can present a real problem for bar admission.

Letters of Recommendation

Two typical problems arise in obtaining letters of recommendation. The first is when a current student feels she does not have a strong relationship with a professor. The second is when an applicant has been out of school for an extended period of time and is unsure of how to approach former professors.

In the first instance, remember that professors expect such requests. Even if you have not written a senior thesis, worked as a teaching assistant or otherwise formed a close relationship with a professor, you can ask a professor for a recommendation. Consider in which classes you have been outspoken and performed well. You will be wise to set up a face-to-face meeting with your professor, provide her with your personal statement and resume, and explain to her why you are applying to law school. Help her understand your motivations so she can write you a strong letter. Finally, give your professor an opportunity to say “no.” Ask if she can give you a strong recommendation. If she declines, politely thank her and find another recommender.

In the second instance, applicants often ask whether they should just use professional contacts for their recommendations. Each school has its own guidelines, but you should aim to have one academic recommendation and one professional recommendation if possible. If you don’t or can’t obtain an academic recommendation, this will raise a red flag for an admissions committee.

And if you are a sophomore or junior considering law school, remember to build those relationships now. Writing a senior thesis or engaging in independent study with a professor is an excellent way to develop the kind of relationship that will help you to obtain that glowing recommendation.
Lack of extracurricular activities or a gap in work experience

Law schools are interested in seeing your development as a full human being, not only as an academic. Long-term involvement in extracurricular activities, especially those in which you have held a leadership role, is preferable to peripatetic club joining, so think quality, not quantity. If you are earlier in your academic career, get invested in activities, stay with them and grow with them. If you are a senior or already have graduated, you can add activities now, but beware that schools are less likely to take those as indicators of character than if you had been involved for a longer period of time.

If you have been out of school for a year or two or ten, you need to show that you have direction in your professional life. The biggest problem is if you have not done anything. Schools know that the job market has been tight, but you can include unpaid internships and volunteer work to show how you have developed and made the most of your situation.

Writing an Addendum

An addendum serves to address weaknesses in an application that you have not sufficiently addressed elsewhere. It should not read as an excuse or a complaint. Rather, it should be an explanation. For example, if your second semester sophomore year grades are low because you were caring for a terminally ill parent, you could provide a brief explanation. If your grades fell because you were pledging a fraternity, that would be seen as an excuse and not a good way to handle the dip in your GPA. If you choose to write an addendum, ensure that it is direct, succinct (while still providing sufficient details as explanation) and is not a complaint or excuse.

Some applicants wonder if they should address a discrepancy in LSAT scores in an addendum. If you scored a 150 the first time and a 165 the second time, congratulations! And don’t think any more about it. The school is likely ignoring your first score. Drawing attention to the score will do you no good, nor does it matter.

Conclusion

Have confidence in yourself and your experience. No application is perfect, but you can take steps to mitigate negatives and emphasize positives. Do your best, and good luck!
DO YOU NEED A RESUME?

You need a resume for applying to law school. That said, turning in a generic work resume with your law school application will do nothing to improve your chances for admission. But show admissions officers a well-written, concise and engaging resume, and they will not only be impressed, they will remember you. And that’s the name of the application game: being remembered.

Key Tips for your Resume

• Thoroughly describe your college education, jobs, internships, study abroad experiences, research positions, volunteer positions, leadership positions, awards, skills and more. At the very least, you should have two main sections: Education and Experience.

• Include all jobs and internships after high school graduation. If you graduated college many years ago and can’t fit all your experiences into your resume, consider describing just the ones in the last 8—10 years and listing previous experiences without descriptions.

• Keep your resume legible with at least ½-inch margins and a 10—12 point font.

• After you’ve updated your resume, ask two trusted colleagues to review it. If you’re in school, go in for a resume review with a career counselor at your college career center.

• Revise, revise, revise until your resume is free of all errors and typos.

The Great Debate: 1 Page or More?

I’ve read articles and tips from so many law school consultants and bloggers saying the resume must be one page! Absolutely only one page! I always wonder, do these people talk with law school admissions officers? How many? And how often?

I talk to a variety of law school admissions officers every year and their answers to this question vary across the board. Some are fine with three pages, others want just one page, and still others say two pages max. In the end, follow the school’s directions. If the directions aren’t clear, call or email the admissions office at that school.

By the way, try to avoid half-pages (e.g., 1 ½ pages, 2 ½ pages, etc.). Half-pages make it look like you either could have written more or cut more.
It’s All in the Details

What I find most disturbing about applicants’ resumes is how few of them adequately describe their work experiences. Do not type “Duties included…” after each job title and include a list of general job duties. This kind of lazy writing shows admissions officers that you don’t want to take the time to explain your skills and accomplishments.

First, write three to five blurbs for each job or internship. Use an action verb to begin each line or blurb. Action verbs include coordinated, organized, directed, prepared, assisted, wrote, compiled, conducted and served, just to name a few.

Next, qualify your experiences with specific details so the reader understands what you learned or accomplished on the job, and quantify your experiences by using numbers to give the reader an idea of the amount or scope of the work that you did.

For example, if you analyzed a survey, how many surveys did you analyze and for what end goal?

Change a general blurb like this:

• Analyzed online survey about Puget Sound.

To a specific blurb like this:

• Analyzed online survey of 445 respondents regarding public outreach and public participation in improving the environmental health of Puget Sound.

If you worked as a barista, how many customers did you serve per shift?

Change a ho-hum blurb like this:

• Prepared drinks for many customers.

To a detailed blurb like this:

• Prepared custom coffee and tea beverages for up to 180—220 customers per shift.

Do this with all of the experiences and you’ll be well on your way to crafting a stellar resume.

Add Your Hours

It’s not something you would include on a work resume, but I’ve heard this enough times from law school admissions officers that I’m passing it on to you. You should list the number of hours worked per week for all jobs and activities (e.g., 18 hours/week). If your hours changed from week to week, list a range (e.g., 3-5 hours/week). Listing your hours per week is a small detail but an important one. It helps the admissions committee gain a better understanding of the scope of work and activities you’ve been involved in.

This is for Your Dream Job

Take as much time with your law school resume as you would for applying to your dream job. Make it the best it can be. Do that and you will impress every person that reads it.
THE IMPORTANCE OF A DIVERSITY STATEMENT

The Importance of Diversity in Law School

Today, most law schools would agree with Justice O’Connor when she said that a diverse student body leads to a “livelier classroom discussion” that is “more enlightened and interesting.”

Indeed, the heart of legal education is the classroom discussion. The very method by which law school faculty teach—questioning, not lecturing—demands participatory learning and depends on lively discourse among the students. What better way to train to become an effective lawyer than to be surrounded by people in this setting with beliefs, values, and viewpoints vastly different from your own? Law students undoubtedly learn as much from one another as they do from their professors.

As such, the goal of the law school admissions committee is to enroll a class of diverse students—individuals who will engage, challenge, and teach one another through their varied backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. As a law school applicant, it is important, then, to convey to the admissions committee how you are “diverse,” i.e., how you will add a unique perspective to that classroom discussion.

But does that mean all applicants should write a diversity statement? Or does it mean that only applicants who identify as an underrepresented minority, based on race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, should write a diversity statement? And does this mean that all applicants who identify a certain way must—or are expected to—write a diversity statement? Here are some guidelines to follow, as these questions often come up amongst law school applicants.

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Should I Write a Diversity Statement?

Whether to write a diversity statement as part of your application is contingent on two questions:

1. Is there something about your identity or background that would allow you to bring a perspective or viewpoint that is typically underrepresented in a law school classroom and/or the legal profession? If so,

2. Have you adequately conveyed that identity or perspective in other parts of your application (e.g., in your personal statement)? If not, then yes: You should write a diversity statement.

When considering the first question, keep in mind that law schools define diversity broadly; it is not limited to “minority status” based on race, ethnicity, culture, or gender or sexual identity. Rather, the concept of diversity also includes ideology, religion, age, socioeconomic status, academic background, employment, disability, veteran status, and other personal characteristics and experiences. If you think the trait you’ve identified has shaped your views in some distinct way, you should consider writing about it.

Think broadly, but reasonably and truthfully, when contemplating whether you have a “diverse” background. It is unquestionably important for minority members of the American population to discuss how their identity may have affected them, influenced their values, or inspired their choices and goals. Racial and ethnic minorities, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity minorities, continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in law schools and in the legal profession, while many historical and current legal issues, such as education, marriage, and income equality, are linked to such identities. The same can be said for disabled individuals, socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, veterans, and members of certain religious groups. The social, cultural, and emotional challenges that these individuals often face inevitably shape their values, convictions, and ideologies, and those are important perspectives to share in a law school application.

What is important to remember, however, is that while people often associate diversity with a group that has been politically disadvantaged, that is not at all the essence of the concept.

Thirty- or forty-something year old applicants may not think of themselves as diverse–why would they? There is no shortage of people in their 30s or 40s in the world or in the legal profession. But at most law schools, the average age of students tends to be between 22 and 24. How refreshing it would be to have some “older” students in the classroom mix, students who have accumulated years of substantive work experience and have dealt with personal and professional challenges that most folks in their early 20s simply haven’t yet faced. Having gotten a mortage, for example, can be a useful perspective in a Property class. Likewise, STEM majors are not likely to conceive of themselves as underrepresented or disadvantaged, but there are far fewer students with STEM degrees in law school than students with liberal arts degrees. And interestingly, a few of the practice areas where demand has remained consistent or even increased in recent years are patent law, health law, and energy law. Indeed, those applicants with technical backgrounds are a diverse—and underrepresented—lot that are in high demand in law schools and in the legal market.
Now, knowing that you may identify as an underrepresented minority, or as someone with an underrepresented perspective or background, it is important to consider the second question: Have you adequately conveyed that identity or perspective in other parts of your application (e.g., in your personal statement)? For many applicants, the very thing that makes them diverse, such as their race or faith, being a first-generation college graduate from an impoverished family, a stem cell scientist, a woman working in a male-dominated profession, or a fourth-generation farmer in Minnesota, is so central to their identity or so tied to their reason for pursuing a law degree, that they will choose to write about it in their personal statement. And they should. The personal statement is the centerpiece of the application, the part where you get to introduce yourself to the admissions committee and show them who you are. If your “diversity” is so connected to the story you want to tell, then do so in the personal statement. And THEN, if parts of your diversity remain undisclosed or not fully expressed in your personal statement, write a diversity statement as a supplemental essay. The rule, for all written materials, i.e., the resume, personal statement, supplemental essays, addenda, is to not be repetitive. As long as your diversity essay contains relevant information as to your identity or background and the perspective you would bring to the law school, that has not been discussed elsewhere in your written materials, it will add value to your application.

In summary, one should write a diversity essay, or any other supplemental essay, only if he or she has something substantive and genuine to write and not simply for the sake of writing an extra essay. (And never start an essay with defensive or self-deprecating statements such as, “I know I’m just an average white middle-class male, but…” or “I haven’t cured cancer and I haven’t overcome any major obstacles, but…” Always remember, the quality of your writing, both in terms of structure and content, as well as your judgment, are critical factors in the admissions review process. Law schools want to know what you as an individual have experienced and learned within the context of your circumstances and choices.
WHEN SHOULD YOU WRITE THE OPTIONAL ESSAY?

Many law schools will ask you for **optional essays** in addition to the required **personal statement**. Are optional essays really optional, or should you view them as required?

Here’s my rule of thumb: **If you’re given another chance to highlight your qualifications and show off your killer writing skills, then you should absolutely take it.** Law schools like to see a proactive attitude—submitting an extra credit essay is a good way to show the adcom (admissions committee) your determination. There is an exception to this rule though—if you have absolutely nothing to say, then you should skip it. Blabbing your way through an essay simply for the sake of filling up space won’t tip the scales in your favor; adcom readers have read enough essays to know which ones are qualitative and which ones are not.

Here are two examples of optional essays from recent applications:

**Duke’s Optional Essays from 2012**

You are welcome to supplement your personal statement with either or both of the following optional essays.

**Optional Essay I:** You may submit an essay providing additional information about why you have chosen to apply to law school in general and Duke in particular. We are interested in the factors that have prompted your interest in a legal career and the ways in which you think Duke can further that interest.

**Optional Essay II:** You may submit an essay that describes how you will enhance the educational environment of the Law School and contribute to the diversity of the student body. Because we believe that diversity enriches the educational experience of all our students, Duke Law School seeks to admit students from a variety of academic, cultural, social, ethnic, economic, and other backgrounds. In this essay, you may tell us more about your particular life experiences with an emphasis on how the perspectives that you have acquired would contribute to the intellectual community of the Law School.
Duke gives you two optional essays with the option of answering one or both. As I mentioned above, if you have something worth saying, grab the opportunity. One of these questions is about diversity—a common theme for an optional essay, so you’ll probably encounter similar questions to this on other applications. This provides a good platform for explaining how you stand out from the crowd. If you’re a white American, don’t think you need to skip over this because of your overrepresented background; the question describes diversity as “… a variety of academic, cultural, social, ethnic, economic, and other backgrounds”—a fairly wide range of experiences, so think hard and get creative to describe how your background will add to the diversity of the next top law school class.

**Georgetown’s Optional Essays from 2014**

*In the Office of Admissions, we take great pride in dispelling the myth that the admissions process is strictly a numbers game. While numbers are important, the Admissions Committee would like to give you the opportunity to express yourself, and us to get to know you, in another way. If you would like to provide us with additional information about yourself which the Admissions Committee will consider in evaluating your application, please feel free to choose one of the following five optional responses for Fall 2014 admission. Your response should be limited to 250 words. Please be advised that the Committee will in no way hold it against you if you choose not to submit an optional response.*

1. *One of the core values of Georgetown Law is that students and faculty learn from each other. As you imagine yourself as a member of the Georgetown Law community, what is one lesson that you have learned in your life that you will want to share with others?*

2. *Who is your “one phone call” and why?*

3. *What is the biggest ethical challenge you have ever faced and how did you handle it?*

4. *How would your best friend describe you? How would your biggest critic describe you?*

5. *Prepare a one-minute video that says something about you. Upload it to an easily accessible website and provide us the URL. (If you are using YouTube, we strongly suggest that you make your video unlisted so it will not appear in any of YouTube’s public spaces.) What you do or say is entirely up to you. Please note that we are unable to watch videos that come in any form other than a URL link.*

Georgetown offers applicants an opportunity to write one of the five optional essays above (only one) in addition to a diversity statement (in another part of the application). I recommend that you take the bait and do the extra work, even though you’ve already done your standout piece for the diversity statement.

I know that Georgetown (and others) say that choosing not to write an optional essay won’t be held against you, but again, I urge you to do the extra soul-searching and take the extra time to write that extra essay (or two). If admissions readers are reviewing two applications of applicants with similar profiles, and one has gone above and beyond to create an additional well-articulated essay, and one has not...well...who do you think they’ll choose? I think they’ll pick the one who’s offered them an additional window into the life of a hard-working, thoughtful, and unique individual and future law student.
THE LAW SCHOOL ADDENDUM

What is the addendum?

An addendum is a short essay that discloses some problem to the admissions committees at your chosen law schools. Its purpose is to provide an explanation for a gap, flaw, or irregularity in your record. Without a strong addendum to provide a clear explanation of what happened, this problem could stand out as a red flag in your application.

Your addendum should include a few main points. Begin with a concise description of the problem. Simply explain what happened and note any direct effects. Next, explain what you did to change the situation and resolve the problem. If you personally caused this problem, be sure to accept the blame for your behavior. Finally, state that you have now put this issue behind you, and finish on a positive note for your future success in law.

Tone is a critical element of a successful addendum. Throughout your essay, your tone should be open, straightforward, and matter-of-fact. This essay is not a place for you to vent your frustrations with a particular issue; instead, it is a place for you to explain the issue to the admissions committee. Under no circumstances should you whine, cry, or rage about the unfairness of your situation, especially if you caused it through your own actions. Instead, simply acknowledge what happened, accept blame if necessary, note how you turned the situation around, and end with a confident, hopeful conclusion.

The addendum is by far the shortest application essay in your arsenal. It should be no more than one page at the longest. This is not the place for a long, convoluted narrative; keep it as concise as possible.
When should you write an addendum?

Addenda are used to explain two main categories of issues. First, academic problems. Second, ethical or disciplinary problems.

**Academic problems**

Generally, you’ll want to explain academic issues that are out of keeping with the rest of your academic record, or that do not accurately reflect your ability to succeed in the demanding profession of law. Without an explanation, this type of anomaly may throw up a red flag in an otherwise solid application.

Some problems you might want to explain include a low grade or difficult semester that dramatically affected your GPA, an unnecessarily low LSAT score, an academic probation, or a withdrawal or other time off from your college education.

For instance, if you had a particular problem that caused you to earn a lower GPA than you would otherwise have been capable of earning, drop several classes mid-semester, or even leave school for a year, you would use an addendum to explain that situation to the admissions committee.

Academic problems like these may have resulted from a variety of causes, from injury or illness to economic hardship to personal or family issues. Be sure to include the reason for your academic problem in your addendum. Explaining this reason will make it clear that this situation does not reflect your true academic capability for success in law.

**Ethical or disciplinary problems**

You’ll also need to disclose any ethical or disciplinary issues that might otherwise cause the admissions committee to reject your application. These could include anything from an academic integrity issue to a probation or suspension at your university to a DUI, arrest, or criminal conviction.

While circumstances like these may not have directly affected your grades or test scores, you should still disclose them in your application. Disclosing ethical issues is important because you must pass the bar’s character and fitness qualification in order to become a lawyer. The US legal system values ethical behavior; therefore, you should be completely honest about your previous mistakes. Being open and aboveboard at every stage of your career is an integral part of demonstrating your character and fitness.

As a general rule, writing an addendum to explain this type of issue should be considered mandatory, especially if you indicate elsewhere on your application that you have a character and fitness issue. Disclosing your past mistakes will establish your honesty and show that you have the high ethical character required of a lawyer in the US legal system.
When should you NOT write an addendum?

I generally recommend that law school applicants write and submit the optional essays that each law school accepts; the diversity statement is a prime example. However, although the addendum is technically considered optional, the situation is a little different. In some circumstances, you do not need to write an addendum.

First, you don’t have to write an addendum when you’re disclosing a very common situation that is otherwise apparent from a glance at your application. For example, if you changed majors after a first semester filled with Cs, the admissions committee will be able to look at your transcripts and see that. While it is acceptable to write an addendum about a situation like this if you feel that you must, there is no real need for an explanation.

You also don’t need to write an addendum explaining an academic issue if there was no cause for it. The only exception is a failing grade; this requires an explanation regardless of the cause.

For example, if you earned an initial low LSAT score for no particular reason besides insufficient study, you do not need to write an addendum. In contrast, if you earned a low LSAT score because you learned about your mother’s cancer diagnosis the night before the exam, and your subsequent emotional distress affected your performance, you should write an addendum explaining that situation.

The key difference is whether something out of the ordinary happened to affect your academic performance. In the first LSAT example, the low score accurately reflected the test-taker’s skills. In the second example, something caused the low score, which means it did NOT accurately reflect those skills. The first example does not require an explanation, but the second does.

And of course, if you have no particular issue to explain to your law school, you definitely don’t need to write an addendum!

Conclusion

An addendum should give a short, clear explanation for a gap or problem in your record. It should show the admissions committee that you accept responsibility for your actions and their consequences, and that you have solved or otherwise managed the problem. Then it should clearly state that with this issue behind you, you’re now ready to successfully tackle law school. By following these simple guidelines, you can create a successful addendum.
Focus on Fit

Increasingly, law school admissions committees are focusing on fit. Not only are law schools trying to admit individuals who have demonstrated academic talent, commitment to entering a profession in which they will serve others, and well-roundedness, as evidenced by extra-curricular activities and work experience; but they also are expending significant energy and resources in the admissions process to try to determine which candidates, among many talented and impressive individuals, will be most likely to excel and thrive in their law school communities.

All law schools are the same in many respects. They all have accomplished faculty and offer a multitude of courses and clinical programs. However, each law school has a unique atmosphere and spirit. Just as there is not a perfect prototype student who will excel at all law schools, not all law schools are right for every student. Each applicant must choose the institution that will be the right fit, not only in terms of course offerings, skills training programs and student services, but also in terms of setting, philosophy and culture. Likewise, law schools want to bring in students who not only have the ability to handle the rigorous curriculum, but also who will fit easily into and contribute to their communities.

Toward this end, many law schools have established interview programs—either in-person, on the phone or via Skype—with admissions officers or with alumni. At some schools, interviews are by invitation only; at others, you may request and schedule an interview. There are admissions deans who will just pick up the phone and call an applicant, without any prior notice, just to ask a question about something in an application (and to see how the applicant handles the unexpected call). On student-guided tours, applicants should keep in mind that the student tour guides work closely with the admissions office staff. Current students, whether or not they are involved in formal programs with their admissions offices, often share with admissions officers interesting conversations they have had with applicants. Many law school applicants will attend panel discussions or law fairs at which they will have the opportunity to talk with law school representatives. There are numerous opportunities for applicants to interact with individuals affiliated with the law schools to which they are applying.
However an interview or interaction with a member of a law school community may come about, it is critically important that you, the applicant, be ready to make the most of your “face time.” Whether it be a formal interview, an impromptu phone call, or a quick conversation with a current student or alum, you must be mindful of how you comport yourself. As a member of the legal profession, much of your success will depend upon how you communicate, how you treat others, and how you present yourself. You are making your first step into the legal profession when you enter the law school application process.

Preparing for Formal Interviews

Once scheduled for a formal interview, you must prepare. Think about what you have presented in your application and know what is on your resume and transcript. Be ready to discuss: (1) your interest in the law schools to which you have applied; (2) your goals and aspirations; (3) experiences listed on your resume; (4) examples of specific work projects or volunteer activities; (5) experiences that have shaped you into the person you have become; and (6) what you will contribute to the law school community and to the profession.

Some of the questions that you may be asked:

What interests you about my law school? Have you visited my law school or talked with any current students and/or alumni? Why do you think my law school would be a good fit for you?

In what areas of law are you interested? In what practice area do you hope to work upon earning your J.D.? In what geographic region do you hope to begin your legal practice?

How did you choose your undergraduate institution? What factors were important to you as you decided which college or university to attend?

What did you enjoy most about your college experience? If you could change something about your undergraduate experience, what would it be?

What extra-curricular activity, internship or paid employment position have you enjoyed most? Why?

What do you like to do when you are not studying or working?

Interviewers also may develop questions based upon information in your file. You must be prepared to expand upon, in a clear and coherent manner, anything and everything listed on your resume. For example, if you list on your resume that you photograph super cars as a hobby, your interviewer may ask how you became interested in photography, where you photograph cars, what are your favorite types of cars, etc. If your interviewer seems to be genuinely interested, perhaps you offer to email to him or her a few of your car photographs? He or she may tell you that it is not necessary, but it can’t hurt to ask.

You also should be prepared for a conversation that will be totally off-script. Perhaps your interviewer will see that you have lived in Boston for the past ten years and will ask you if you are a Red Sox fan. Depending upon your answer, the entire conversation might revolve around the 2013 World Series and what it was like to be in Boston for that series which followed so closely the Boston Marathon bombings. You must be prepared to let the conversation with your interviewer develop and flow organically. And it’s okay for you to ask questions and to engage your interviewer, just as you would in any conversation.

Your goal in the interview is not only to impress your interviewer with your intelligence and accomplishments; it also is to show the interviewer that you are able to carry on a conversation in a mature and comfortable fashion. (Tip: One way to lead your interviewer to a very quick conclusion that you cannot carry on such a conversation is to use the word “like” once or twice in every sentence.). Most importantly, you want your interviewer to come away from his or her time with you feeling that you are someone who has the temperament and personality to be comfortable and successful in the law school community.
Informal Interactions with Members of the Law School Community

Law schools are tight-knit communities. Admissions officers, current students, staff, faculty, and alumni are loyal and protective. They want to do what they can to ensure that the student bodies at their institutions continue to be of the highest caliber. Impressions that you make, in any interaction with individuals affiliated with a law school, may well find their way to those who are making admissions decisions.

Examples/Tips

- If you call a law school admissions office to ask a question, be sure that you behave in a professional and respectful manner. If you’ve had to spend 10 minutes working your way through an annoying phone tree before you get a live person on the phone, remember that the person who answers the phone probably did not decide to set up that cumbersome phone tree; be courteous and patient.

- If you take a student-guided tour, turn off your cell phone; do not answer email or text messages during the tour; show your tour guide the respect that you would want to be shown if you were leading the tour.

- If you are able to meet with the dean or director of admissions during a law school visit, be mindful that that person is busy; think about the questions you will ask ahead of time; be prepared to express your interest in the school, why you believe that the school is a good fit for you and you a good fit for the school; do not sit in the office of a dean or director with wandering eyes trying to come up with questions; do not ask the dean or director “tell me about your school,” or “what questions should I be asking?”

- If you receive a phone message or email from a current student or alum offering to share information about his or her alma mater, do not ignore it; return the call or reply to the message; take the opportunity to ask good questions and to make a connection with that person.

- If you attend a law school fair or forum, bring copies of your resume and offer one to law school representatives. Some may accept your resume, while others may not. If law school representatives have their business cards available, take them. Send emails after the events thanking them for the conversations. These are the people to whom you can address questions as they may arise down the road.

- Always greet those you meet with a firm handshake and look people in the eye when you are engaged in conversation.

- A good general rule of thumb is to treat everyone affiliated in any way with a law school with impeccable manners and with the respect with which you would like to be treated. Actually, this rule is not limited to people affiliated with law schools!

Conclusion

Each year, law school admissions committees consider and evaluate thousands of applications and work hard to make offers of admissions to candidates who demonstrate the ability to excel in a rigorous curriculum, who have been involved in leadership roles in extra-curricular and community service activities, who have completed impressive internships or study abroad programs, and who come highly recommended by professors and work supervisors. No law school can offer admission to all of the competitive candidates in their applicant pools. Admissions committees strive to bring into their entering classes a diverse group of individuals who bring more to the table than simply the ability to handle academic work. They consider and evaluate a great deal more than just LSAT scores and undergraduate cumulative grade point averages. They are looking for individuals whom they believe will be happy and comfortable in their institutions and, thus, who will enjoy the greatest likelihood of success. For this reason, applicants must make the most of each and every opportunity to engage and interact with members of law school communities.
The essays, resume, letters of recommendation, interviews, and LSAT are all very important elements of the application, but they aren’t the hardest part. The waiting is the hardest part—especially when you find yourself without a final decision for months. The waiting can be the most painful if you are placed on a wait list (WL), but it doesn’t have to be.

Although nobody likes being put on the wait list, you should take comfort in many things. First, realize that you are in good company. It may be hard to imagine, but the reality is that the vast majority of law school applicants will be waitlisted somewhere every year and, at many schools, a large portion of the entering class will come from the wait list. The number of people admitted from the wait list varies from school to school—and it even varies from year to year. Knowing how the wait list works and knowing what things you can do to improve your chances can make the wait list somewhat bearable.

When schools are going through the decision making process, there are clear admits, clear denies, and then there’s the middle. In many cases, the admissions committee is simply not ready to make a final decision on an applicant. There is typically something about the application that they like, and there is something about the application that gives them pause. The wait list is created from this group—usually in the late winter and spring. Decisions from this group don’t typically start until after the first tuition deposit is due (April or May) when the admissions offices have a better sense of who has committed to attending. There will almost always be what we refer to in law admissions as “summer melting” in the class, but it all starts in the beginning of the summer.

When looking to admit people from the wait list, the admissions offices will run weekly or daily reports on their class statistics, namely LSAT score, undergrad GPA, URM, male/female ratio, geographic diversity, work experience, etc. This is like Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, but we call it The Admissions Hierarchy of Needs. If the LSAT score checks out, then undergrad GPA is up next; if undergrad GPA is okay, then next is URM, etc. Certainly if the school needs undergrad GPA (not until the very end will LSAT and uGPA medians be secured for all but maybe one school) in addition to gender and geographic diversity, and you happen to have all of that, then BINGO! Hello admit. The needs of the law school and how you fit into these needs are beyond your control. What you can control is the following:

- Does the school think you will matriculate
if admitted? This is supremely important. Law schools do not want to admit someone off the wait list if they don’t really want to come. There just isn’t time for that type of indecision—especially in the summer months. It is a fine needle to thread, but a phrase we like to use at Spivey Consulting is that you want to be professionally persistent without being a pest. Soon after you are waitlisted, send a well-written letter of continued interest explaining why you are drawn to that particular school. Do not send a letter every week, and do not send flowers, candy, or pizza to the admissions office. You may follow up, but timing and tone are key elements to the correspondence. Use discretion.

- Know that you are ALWAYS waitlisted for a reason. There are good reasons, e.g., the law school is anticipating that it may need something you have for its class. And there are bad reasons, e.g., yield protection (YP), a sloppy application, etc. If you have a sense of the reason, you may be in a better position to highlight or mitigate that reason. For example, if you’ve graduated and received an honor or award, you may want to update the school. If you believe you’ve been YP’d, you can write a school-specific letter on why you want to attend (if true, because often the YP might have been the right call!).

- If you determine that your LSAT score may have been the reason for WL rather than admit, you could take the June test. Not all schools will suggest or like this idea, but it will be hard for many to overlook a higher score.

- You may hear some people suggest sending in an additional letter of recommendation, but in general, this will not make much of a difference. There are cases when it will matter (from a faculty member at the law school, perhaps) but those are few and far between. Pay attention to which schools openly ask for this, and which schools ask that you specifically do not.

- Visiting the law school is a great way to let them know that you are interested. Each school has different procedures for this, so be sure to plan your visit ahead of time and follow the normal protocol for the visit. Follow-up with the admissions office via an email or letter after you visit. Let them know about your experience and level of interest.

There are logistics to remember, and since it is always wise to make alternate plans, we suggest that you secure a place at another law school by submitting a tuition deposit. It is important to note that you DO NOT have to withdraw from the wait list if you deposit at another school. See the LSAC Statement of Good Admissions Practices http://www.lsac.org/lsacresources for more information.

In sum, being waitlisted can often be a small speed bump on the road to being admitted. When waitlisted, the ball is in your court and there is a good deal you can do to run with it! Remember this: the day you start working toward getting off of the wait list is the first day you communicate with a law school—even prior to submitting your application. Everything you do can build up momentum in your favor, including very early in the cycle. Make a great impression and stay in touch, because almost every school will take people off of the wait list, not because of an LSAT/GPA combination, but because they want that student at their school.

GOOD LUCK!