

Applying to Law School

LAW SCHOOL PREP GUIDELINES

This guideline is a summary of important things to know in making the decision about whether law school is a good fit for you. This handout should be used in conjunction with The Pre-Law Handbook which is available for all students in the Pre-Law office in 205 South Brookings. E-mail prelaw@arts.wustl.edu for more information. You may also meet with a Pre-Law Advisor for specific questions related to preparing for law school.

ACADEMIC PREPARATION

The two most important factors law schools consider in deciding whom to admit are the undergraduate grade point average and the score on the LSAT.

Select a major (or majors) in an area that interests you, and do well. Many law school applicants have majors in political science, English, history, economics or philosophy, but law schools also welcome those with majors in science, engineering, the arts or business. A technical or scientific background can be very helpful for lawyers who specialize in environmental issues or patent law, for example.

Look for courses that require lots of writing and courses that train you to think analytically. If your major is in an artistic, scientific, or technical discipline, use your elective opportunities to acquire strong reading and writing skills. Minimize your use of pass-fail grading.

Do not focus exclusively on law-related courses. It's fine to take some of these as an opportunity to test your level of interest, but save law study for law school. Use your undergraduate years as a time to acquire a very broad education.

Learning a foreign language and studying abroad are wonderful opportunities to pursue during your undergraduate years. The law, like everything else, deals increasingly with global concerns. The ability to communicate in a language other than English can be very valuable.

If you are eligible, consider completing an honors thesis in your major field. In addition to graduating with Latin honors (summa cum laude, magna cum laude, etc.), you will have the opportunity to work closely with a faculty member to conduct original research and create a significant piece of writing.

INTERNSHIPS AND EXTRACURRICULARS

Use internship opportunities to test your interest in law and to gain some experience in different workplace settings. Well-chosen internships can help you learn what kind of working environments you like and whether law-related work appeals to you.

Extracurricular endeavors can help you develop organizational, leadership, and public speaking skills that are valuable to law students and lawyers. Law school admissions officials are very interested in applicants who have made a serious commitment to one or more activities and have taken on significant responsibilities within organizations.

LSAC, LSAT AND LSDAS

The Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) is a corporation that coordinates and facilitates law school admissions processes. Everything you need to know about the law school admissions process is available on the LSAC web site at www.LSAC.org. LSAC oversees the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) and the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS).

The LSAT is required by ABA-approved law schools for admission and is given four times a year. The LSAT score is very important to law school admissions officers.

The test consists of five 35-minute timed multiple choice sections: one on reading comprehension, one



on analytical thinking, two on logical reasoning, and a fifth “experimental” section. There is also a section that seeks a writing sample. Careful preparation for the test is essential. Plan to take it just once and give it your best effort! How you prepare (by taking a test prep class or working on your own is up to you, but do not take the test without lots of practice. There is no substitute for taking previously used, real LSAT exams (available from Law Services or the test prep providers) under realistic, timed conditions. Do not register for and take the actual LSAT for “practice,” since all of your scores within a five year period are reported to the law schools, and most law schools average multiple scores.

June after the junior year is probably the best time to take the test for those planning to apply to law schools as seniors. You will have your score before the summer is over, so very early in the fall you can develop a realistic list of schools to which to apply. A good second choice is to take the LSAT in the fall of the senior year (September or October), which still allows applications to be filed well before the deadlines. The last realistic opportunity to take the test for those applying as seniors is December. Those planning to work or pursue other interests between college and law school can put the test off a bit.

LSDAS prepares a report of your academic record for the law schools to which you apply. Most schools require that you register with LSDAS, and you must pay a registration fee that is separate from LSAT fees. Law schools contact LSDAS directly for the report; you simply indicate to LSDAS how many reports you would like to pay for to be sent to law schools.

WAITING UNTIL AFTER GRADUATION TO APPLY TO LAW SCHOOL

Many undergraduates consider taking some time between college and law school to work, pursue a fellowship, community service (e.g. Teach for America, AmeriCorps, or the Peace Corps), or travel opportunity. Considering such options is a wise idea. Waiting a year or more after finishing college to apply is a popular option; at least half of the first year class at most law schools will be people who have been out of college for one year or more.

Some reasons to wait to apply:

- You will have time to gain some added experience, self-confidence, and maturity.
- You can become more confident about law school and becoming a lawyer.
- Your senior year grades will be included in the GPA calculation.
- You’ll likely be a more interesting law school applicant.
- Full-time work experience may make you more attractive to legal employers.
- You can earn money to pay for your law school education.

Some reasons to go directly on to law school:

- You are absolutely sure you want to become a lawyer, and you want to get an immediate start on your career.
- You believe you may experience a loss of academic momentum by waiting.
- You do not wish to begin repaying educational loans accrued during your undergraduate education.

WHERE TO APPLY

Most seniors apply to between eight and ten law schools. In general, you should choose a minimum of one or two “reach” schools (where your odds of being admitted are less than 30%), two or three where your chances of admission look at least reasonable, and one or two “safe” schools (where your chances of admission exceed 75%). Be sure you would be willing to attend your safe schools — do research beforehand.

There are many resources available to help you calculate your realistic chances of being admitted at various law schools:

- The ABA-LSAC Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools, free via the LSAC Web site (<http://www.lsac.org>). The online version includes a feature under which you can enter your own LSAT/GPA figures and find the likelihood of your admission to individual law schools.
- Law School Admission Profiles published by the Midwest Association of Pre-Law Advisors, free and available in the College of Arts & Sciences Office.
- The Boston College Locator, free and available on-line

at <http://www.bc.edu/offices/careers/gradschool/law/lawlocator.html>. This Web site includes links to the law schools’ home pages.

These resources provide data to help you make good choices about where to apply.

Consider geography in your decision, because you are likely to develop contacts for potential careers in the area in which you are attending law school. However, don’t let geography be the single controlling factor unless you have strong personal reasons for staying in a particular region. Consider schools that will meet your needs in several parts of the country. Obviously, the greater the national reputation of the law school, the less geography matters. Think about cost in your selection of schools. Public institutions tend to be less expensive than private institutions (especially in states where you are a resident or could become one), and some private schools are generous with merit scholarships. Don’t let yourself end up with a set of choices that are all unaffordable. Other considerations include size, reputation, diversity, opportunities to participate in clinics or on law journals, placement opportunities and areas of specialization.

COMPLETING APPLICATIONS

When you complete the actual law school applications, proofread everything carefully. Type, print very neatly, or use the LSACD, which allows you to complete your applications on your personal computer and print them or send them electronically. Follow all instructions to the letter. Leave nothing blank — if a question is inapplicable to you, put “not applicable” in the space provided. Do not sign the application until you are sure you understand all aspects of it.

Look at the questions that seek a written statement, and then tailor your answer to the question — don’t assume that one statement will suffice for every school to which you are applying.

Disclose any past “troubles,” including academic problems, discipline problems, arrests, convictions — anything the application seeks. These sorts of incidents will not automatically bar your admission to law school. The law schools are looking carefully to see whether you have taken responsibility for your actions and how you have responded to negative consequences. If you don’t disclose them on the applications, they may catch up with you somewhere else in the application process, triggering a misconduct inquiry. Please talk with a pre-law advisor if you have any concerns at all about these questions on the applications.

It is a good idea to include a resume (one page preferred) that outlines your academic

accomplishments, activities, work experience and other competencies. Do not, however, fail to answer questions on the application itself by noting “see enclosed resume” — answer the questions AND include the resume.

Apply early! Most law schools have rolling admissions and it is to your advantage to have your application

read as early as possible. Some law schools offer early decision and early notification. Try to have all your applications completed by Thanksgiving so that your file is considered while most of the seats in the class are still available. This also maximizes your chances for merit-based scholarships.

THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

In many ways, the personal statement is the only part of the application that is completely within your control. This is your opportunity to make the admissions committee remember you, and to distinguish yourself from other applicants. Imagine that it substitutes for a ten minute interview—what would you want to tell your interviewer about you?

The personal statement is important both in its substance and its presentation. It warrants numerous drafts. Show it to people you trust and ask for their comments. Take it to the Writing Center and ask for a critique. You may also make an appointment with a pre-law advisor in the Career Center who can help you brainstorm on topics and polish your drafts.

Here are some thought-starters on writing the personal statement from Don Asher, a nationally recognized expert on graduate school admissions who has spoken at Washington University Junior Jumpstart:

- Has a course, independent research project, or other academic experience ignited your intellectual passion?
- Have you overcome serious adversity in your life?
- What is unusual or unique about you?
- Have you ever received encouraging words from a professor, employer, or other person that are relevant? What were they? How did they influence your choices?

Answer each question by making a list, and then take time to develop the thoughts fully. Here is a list of “do’s and don’ts” that have been developed after listening to lots of law school admissions deans and directors talk about how they read personal statements.



DO:

- Answer the specific question, if one is asked.
- Let the reader know who you are; this is usually the only opportunity you have to “get beyond the numbers.”
- Be truthful, specific, and accurate.
- Write about something you know and with which you are comfortable.
- Write about adversity overcome, but emphasize the overcoming, not the adversity.
- Focus rather narrowly; zero in on a subject and cover it well.
- Write about attributes, achievements, and intellectual passions.
- Place the focus of your essay into the context of attending law school and your hopes for your career.
- Keep the writing style conventional.
- Make sure any supplemental statements are just as good as your personal statement.
- Keep to the prescribed length; if none is given, keep to two pages.
- Double space and leave adequate margins.
- Put your name on each page along with your LSAC number. (Check with each school, as some schools may have another preferred format.)
- Proofread carefully! Ensure that spelling, punctuation, and grammar are perfect.

DON'T:

- Try to write what you think the law school “wants to hear.”
- Summarize your experiences chronologically; let your resume do that.
- Apologize. If you need to explain something, it is usually better to do so in a separate statement.
- Criticize the LSAT.
- Strain to appear unique; not everyone can make themselves appear unique.
- Use contrived formats (i.e., your obituary, a summation to the jury on why you should be admitted).
- Use long quotations; if you use them at all, keep them short, and be sure they are relevant.
- Philosophize about the role of law in society, or other lofty topics.
- Focus on another person, even if that person has been the most influential person in your life.
- Talk about why you are not going to medical school.
- Brag about your accomplishments. Put your experiences into a context. What have you learned? How have you grown?
- Send videos or senior theses unless they are requested. “The thickness of the file is inversely related to the quality,” according to one admissions officer.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Like the personal statement, strong letters of recommendation can make a positive difference in situations where your GPA and LSAT score put you in the middle of the group applying to a given law school. Seek a minimum of two letters from faculty members who know you well.

The best and most persuasive recommendation letters are written by faculty members who can comment in some detail on your intellectual capacity, your writing skills, your motivation, and your overall academic experience here. You can enhance the chances of getting such a detailed letter by letting faculty members get to know you. Participate in class. Use office hours to discuss material you don't understand fully. Take a second class with a professor from whom you learned a great deal. A strong and detailed letter from a junior faculty member who knows you and your abilities well is better than a terse letter from a senior faculty member or employer who does not know you well and cannot comment in detail on your skills and attributes.

Ask for a letter of recommendation in person. Ask if he/she can write you a strong letter of recommendation. If there is any hesitation, thank the person and ask someone else. If necessary, ask your recommender if you can set up some time to talk about your

experiences and goals. Ask for these letters early to give your writers plenty of time. Give the letter writers the tools they need to write a thorough, personal letter, including a copy of your resume, an unofficial transcript, a copy of significant written work completed in the letter writer's class and anything else that might help him/her supply details in the letter. Provide the writer with a written request and a self-addressed (and stamped if off campus) envelope.

The College Office maintains a free recommendation letter service for law school applicants (seniors and alumni). Pick up several Washington University recommendation forms from 205 South Brookings. When you have decided where to apply, send an e-mail to the pre-law advisor in the College Office at prelaw@artsci.wustl.edu notifying which letters should be sent to which schools. They will take care of duplicating and forwarding the letters to your law schools. Letters are kept on file for five years and may only be used for law school applications.

Send your letter writers a thank you note after the letter has been submitted. The people who take time to write letters for you are interested in your plans, and you should let them know where you are accepted in the spring and which law school you will attend.



CHECKLIST FOR APPLYING TO LAW SCHOOL

- ___ Prepare for and take the LSAT no later than the fall prior to the year you plan to matriculate in law school.
- ___ Register for LSDAS by the fall prior to the year you plan to matriculate.
- ___ Request letters of recommendation from professors who taught courses during your junior or senior year of study who know you and your academic work well. Have the letters sent either to the Washington University Pre-Law Office or directly to LSDAS.
- ___ Research law schools. Visit campuses if possible. Try to identify what qualities you are looking for in a law school.
- ___ Consider attending a Law School Forum.
- ___ Attend pre-law information sessions held at the Career Center and elsewhere on campus.
- ___ Request that official transcripts be sent directly to LSDAS from each undergraduate and graduate institution you have attended.
- ___ Write your personal statement. The Writing Center will help you to refine your work. Pre-law advisors will review personal statements as well.
- ___ Write a resume and include it with your applications. The Career Center can help you to refine your resume.
- ___ Check your LSDAS report for accuracy.
- ___ Send in your applications. **TRY TO COMPLETE APPLICATIONS PRIOR TO THANKSGIVING.**
- ___ Provide the Pre-Law Office with Dean's Certification Forms.
- ___ Review financial aid information for each school and apply as necessary.

CHOOSING A LAW SCHOOL

You should consider a number of factors beyond the law school "rankings" in deciding where to enroll. For your top choices, a personal visit is critical.

When narrowing your choices and deciding where to visit, consider the following:

- Re-read the school's publications carefully.
- Consider where the faculty were trained and their areas of expertise.
- Consider faculty depth and advanced degree programs available. (If you are seriously interested in intellectual property law, for example, a school with four faculty members who teach in this area and an advanced (LLM) degree program in IP law should receive your careful consideration. Some law schools will have just one faculty member who specializes in this area.)
- Look for a bright and diverse student body. Legal education is highly dependent upon discussion and argument with fellow students, and you will learn best in a setting where the other students bring intellectual strengths and diverse experiences to the classroom.
- Consider what journals are available for students to work on. A school with three student-edited journals may offer you a better chance of participating than one with a single law review. The same can be said of moot court programs.
- Consider clinical opportunities. If you want to be a criminal lawyer, for example, will you have the opportunity to get out of the library and work on real cases with real clients under the supervision of attorneys BEFORE you become licensed to practice?
- Consider cost as well. How much debt are you willing to incur to become a lawyer? Figure out what you would need to borrow to finance your education at each school. What will the monthly payments be like? How will they affect your lifestyle when you finish law school? What kind of job do you want when you finish law school? Find out if there are part-time work opportunities for second and third year students.



LAW SCHOOL VISITS

When you visit a law school, remember that you are looking for a place to continue your education AND a strong professional placement service — law school is a professional program, and you should expect your law school to assist you in finding a suitable position in the legal field upon your graduation.

To assess what the educational experience at a given law school will be like, try to do the following:

- Sit in on some classes. Stop in the lounge and talk to students and faculty. The quality of your fellow students is very important. Try to discern whether you will be challenged and stretched intellectually, and also whether you will feel comfortable.
- Look at the library and computing facilities, as these will become very familiar to you. Law students spend countless hours in the library. Are the facilities large enough for the student body? Are they comfortable and well lit? Are they open at the times you will want to use them?
- Talk to the administrators you will rely on such as the dean of students and the financial aid administrator. Do they seem knowledgeable and supportive?
- Ask about clinics, journals, and moot court. Find out how students are chosen and whether everyone who wants to participate is able to do so.
- Think about where you will live. Ask about housing. Be sure you will be able to live safely and within reasonable commuting distance if you are not in campus housing.

To get a sense of the law school's professional placement record, visit the Career Office. Ask about the following:

- What sorts of positions do graduates take? What starting salaries do they earn? Where do they locate?
- Look at interview sign-up sheets to see which employers come to visit the law school to interview students.
- How do those in the top 10% of the class do, and how do those in the middle and lower thirds do in terms of finding jobs? Everyone can't finish in the top 10%, and you will want to know what your prospects are if you don't do as well as you hope.

FINANCING LAW SCHOOL

Law school is an expensive investment. It would not be difficult to incur a cost of \$120,000 for a three-year legal education; tuition alone is \$25-30,000 per year at many private institutions. Books, housing, food and personal expenses add up.

Eighty percent of law students rely on loans as the primary source of financing for their education. The median debt level for recent law school graduates was \$80,000, while the median annual salary for the same graduates was \$49,000. Think carefully about how much debt you are willing to assume, and what salary you will need to earn to pay back your loans.

The law schools to which you apply should be your primary source of information about the availability of funds. In general, you will be considered independent of your family for the purposes of determining federal aid eligibility. However, law schools will likely require parental income information in order to determine eligibility for institutional scholarships and loans.

Start the financial aid application process in December. File the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as soon as you can after January 1.

If you have current indebtedness, get some financial counseling. Save as much money as you can before you begin law school. Pay off any outstanding consumer debt. Maintain a good credit record.



CONCLUSION AND CONTACT INFORMATION

A career in law can be wonderfully fulfilling. Now you know more about some of the important decisions you will need to make and about the nuts and bolts of the application process. Let us know how we can be of help to you. Good luck!

Undergraduate Pre-Law Resources:

- 205 South Brookings
- Pre-Law Student Information E-mail; sign up at prelaw@artsci.wustl.edu
- Pre-Law Advising Team: prelaw@artsci.wustl.edu or 314-935-6897
- Pre-Law Web Site: http://artsci.wustl.edu/~college/Preprofessional_Programs/Law
- Career Center Web Site: www.careers.wustl.edu

