

Pre-law at Pitt



A Comprehensive Guide For Pre-Law Students
At The University Of Pittsburgh

Pre-Law Advising
Office of Career Development & Placement Assistance
Division of Student Affairs

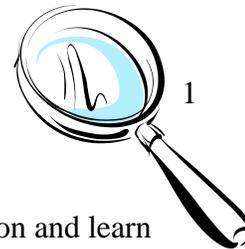
University of Pittsburgh ♦ 200 William Pitt Union ♦ Pittsburgh, PA 15260
(412) 383-4473 ♦ www.careers.pitt.edu

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Congratulations on taking the first step towards preparing for your future in law – reading this Pre-Law Planner! This guide is intended to help you determine whether the legal profession is right for you, answer your questions about undergraduate preparation for law school, assist you with the law school admissions process, and inform you about life in law school and beyond. You will undoubtedly have more questions after reading this information, and I encourage you to utilize the resources mentioned in this guide to get the answers to those questions.

One important resource is the pre-law advisor. Located in the Office of Career Development & Placement Assistance on the 2nd floor of the William Pitt Union, the pre-law advisor is available for individual and group appointments to answer your questions about the law school application process. To make an appointment with the pre-law advisor, simply call (412) 383-4473. We encourage you to utilize our services in your career planning and look forward to working with you soon!



EXPLORING LAW AND LAW SCHOOL

Before making the final decision to attend law school, it is important to do some career exploration and learn more about the legal field and law school. The legal profession is often misrepresented in movies, books and television programs. Unfortunately, many people decide on a career in the law because of what they see on television, in the movies, or read in a novel. These people become disenchanted with a career in the law when they discover that a life in the law is drastically different than what they were expecting.

Let's explore some of the realities of life in the law.

Realities about Life in the Law

- **Law is competitive.** Law is a competitive profession. As a lawyer, it is your job to win your case, and beat your opponent. Not only do lawyers compete against those with whom they are engaged in legal dispute, they may also compete with other lawyers within their own firm. In larger law firms, the atmosphere is often quite competitive, with younger associates competing with their peers for good cases, for the chance to work with certain partners, and ultimately for promotions. Most people who enjoy law are those who describe themselves as competitive by nature. In order to succeed in the legal profession, one should be comfortable with, if not thrive upon, competition.
- **Law requires long hours.** The legal profession requires long hours from those who work within it. Once out of law school, lawyers work from eight to ten years as “associates” before they are eligible to become a “partner.” Long hours are a way of life for most associates, especially in larger law firms. Many people think the long hours are only a part of the new lawyer’s life, but long hours are a reality for most lawyers, whether they are associates or partners. A typical lawyer’s work-week might be over 60 hours long. It is not uncommon for lawyers to work twelve-hour days, six or seven days a week. That may not seem like too much time, but if you break it down, that means working from eight in the morning until eight in the evening every day. Doesn’t leave much time to enjoy your life, does it?
- **All lawyers aren’t rich.** Many people consider law because they want to find a profession with a high salary. Unfortunately, the assumption that lawyers make a lot of money is one of the most pervasive myths. The average starting salary for a lawyer is \$50,000. Remember, this is just an average, so that means that first year lawyers make both more than and less than that amount. Salary greatly varies throughout the profession, with starting salaries ranging from \$30,000 to over \$100,000. Typically, higher salaries are found in large law firms where corporate law is practiced. These positions are difficult to obtain and usually only go to the top 10% of law students. Thus, the majority of lawyers make significantly less than \$100,000. Furthermore, there tends to be a direct relationship between one’s salary and the amount of hours one works in a law firm. That is, the more money you make, the more hours you can expect to put in. To make \$60,000 or more, you can expect to consistently work over 60 hours a week.
- **Most lawyers don’t go into court that often.** It is common to hear “I want to be a lawyer because I am good at arguing.” Maybe you’ve thought this before, or maybe someone has told you that you should be a lawyer because you have perfected the art of arguing. The truth is, most lawyers don’t get to argue that often. With some exceptions, the majority of lawyers’ time is not spent arguing in court. Most law is practiced behind a desk, at a computer or in a library, rather than in a courtroom. Preparing a lawsuit for trial may take a significant amount of time – sometimes several years! This is especially true in more complex cases such as those that often occur in corporate law. Furthermore, many cases are settled before they even get to court, so attorneys often don’t get to use



- their argumentation skills. While it is helpful to have strong argumentation skills for a legal career, there are other skills that are utilized more often, and thus, are more vital for success in the legal profession. Lawyers call upon their critical thinking, analytical reasoning, writing, and research skills more often than they do their argumentation skills. Practicing law is a lot like researching and writing term papers in school, so individuals who enjoy and are skilled at research, critical thinking, and writing tend to succeed in law and enjoy their chosen profession.



If law is not what you see on TV, then what is it?

Law is an intellectually stimulating profession in which you will research and write significantly, call upon your creative thinking skills to help make a case for your client, and advise others about the best course of action. It is a challenging but rewarding career for people who enjoy working hard, solving problems, using analytical reasoning, writing and research skills, and continuously learning about the law.



Hopefully you are more informed about the legal profession after reading about some of the realities associated with it. For more information regarding the legal profession, you may want to visit the following websites:

<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos053.htm>

- Contains comprehensive information about the legal profession. This page is from the Occupational Outlook Handbook, a publication that describes occupations, educational requirements to enter them, typical working conditions, average salaries, expected growth in the professions and more useful information.

<http://www.abanet.org/home.html>

- This is the home page for the American Bar Association. General information about law and the ABA is found here.

<http://www.nalp.org/>

- This is the National Association of Law Placement's web site. It is geared more towards law students, but there is some useful information about hiring trends, etc.

<http://www.ilrg.com/>

- Internet Legal Resource Guide. This is a general site that contains information about law, law firms, law school, legal research and other legal related categories.

<http://www.hg.org/>

- Hieros Gamos is a comprehensive mega-site for legal related web sites. Includes links to sites for information about the study of law, legal specialties, law firms, legal journals and more.

Reasons to go to law school

Before making the decision to attend law school, it is important to examine your reasons for wanting to go. People go to law school for all kinds of reasons, some better than others. Often, people choose law school because of the common myths associated with the practice of law. They may choose law because they want to make a lot of money, or because they are good at arguing. As you know, those assumptions about the practice of law are faulty, and thus would be poor reasons for choosing law school. Let's look at other not-so-good and good reasons people cite for going to law school.

Not-so-good reasons for attending law school



- ✓ **I don't know what else to do with my major.** Too often, people choose law school because other people with their same undergraduate major are going to law school. This is common with majors like political science or history. Just because you majored in something that commonly leads to law school does not mean that you have to follow that career path. Explore your interests, abilities, personality and values to determine whether it is law or something else for which you are suited.
- ✓ **I have the skills to succeed in law school.** Just because you are skilled at reading, writing, critical thinking and analytical reasoning doesn't mean that you should go to law school. You might succeed in law school but hate the practice of law. Examine what other professions require the same skills to see if there is a better fit for you elsewhere before making the commitment to law school.
- ✓ **I want a professional job.** Some people choose law school because they want a job where they are a "professional." Respect and admiration are usually what these people are seeking; however, these qualities can be garnered from other jobs as well. There is a vast array of professional jobs that will give someone the respect and admiration they seek; law is one example. Explore other professional careers to see whether anything else sounds interesting to you.
- ✓ **A law degree is versatile.** Many people think that a law degree will help them in a variety of professions, especially business. The truth is, law school teaches you to BE A LAWYER, not to be a business person. If you have thoughts about going into business, consider an MBA or a joint MBA/JD program. There are some occupations outside of law where a law degree could be helpful or even necessary. People in politics or international affairs, for instance, usually have a law degree even though they may not be directly dealing with the law. Be sure to extensively research your potential career to determine whether a law degree is indeed helpful before you make the decision to get schooling that you may not need.
- ✓ **My parents want me to be a lawyer.** Pressure from parents or significant others to follow a particular career path is a common, but unfortunate experience. Examine your motivations for applying to law school – do you really want to go to law school, or are you attempting to please someone else?



- ✓ **I am intrigued by the study of law.** Law school is three years of reading, discussing, and learning about law. Wanting to continue your education in law and further develop your knowledge and understanding of the field is a valid reason for going to law school.
- ✓ **I want to be a lawyer.** If, after extensive career exploration, you decide that you do indeed want to be a lawyer, then go to law school! Obviously, attending law school is the only way you can fulfill your dream.
- ✓ **I need a law degree to accomplish my career plans.** If a law degree will help you to accomplish your career plans, then by all means go to law school. Just make sure that you have adequately researched your chosen career and that a degree in law is necessary or will help you to advance in the field.

Learn about law and law school before you make the commitment. Law school is expensive in terms of money, time and energy, and you don't want to waste those resources if law is not a good fit for you. If you think you are going to law school for the wrong reasons, consult one of the campus resources listed below for help in understanding your motivations and making an informed career choice. You may learn that there is another career better suited for you, or that law is indeed what you want to pursue.

- **Pre-Law Advising**, Career Development & Placement Assistance; 2nd floor, William Pitt Union. Call 383-4473 for an appointment.
- **Career Counseling**, Career Development & Placement Assistance; 2nd floor, William Pitt Union. Call 383-4473 for an appointment.
- **Academic Advising** within your school or department; contact your assigned advisor.

What you can expect from law school?

One more thing that you may want to know before you make the law school commitment is what law school is actually like. Read on to learn about what you can expect from law school by reading the answers to some frequently asked questions!

How long is law school?

Law school takes three years to complete - if you go to school full-time. There are programs that will allow you to go part-time, and those usually take four years instead of three. Most people who go part-time work full-time and take classes at night.

What types of classes do you take?

Generally, all law schools teach the same classes in the first year. That means that your friend who attends Harvard takes the same classes that you take at your local law school. These classes cover topics such as contracts, criminal law, legal writing, and torts. After the first year, students are able to specialize a bit by taking classes that interest them such as health law, or technology law. Most law schools embrace a "generalist" philosophy meaning that they provide a general knowledge base about the legal field, rather than training specialists in certain areas of the law. For instance, you could get your first job as a corporate attorney even if you did not take a corporate law class while in school. Of course, it will be easier for you to find a job and succeed in that job if you took related courses while in law school, but it is not required to do so. There is some indication that this may be changing, as more and more law schools are adding certificate programs where students are able to earn a certificate in a specialized area.

What is the “Socratic Method”?

The Socratic Method is an approach to teaching that mirrors the question and answer format that Socrates used when teaching his students. In essence, the professor “picks” one student to answer questions about a particular case or point that he or she is teaching the class. The question and answer period may range from a few minutes to the whole class period, whereby the professor expects that particular student to answer (or attempt to answer) every question that he or she asks. Professors may randomly pick students, alphabetically pick students, or use a seating chart to decide whom he or she will pick to answer the questions for that section of the class. Many law school classes utilize the Socratic Method to varying degrees, but rarely is it a truly traumatic experience. There are horror stories about being in “the hot seat” where a student is unable to answer the questions posed of him or her and the negative reactions from the professor that this inability elicits, but it is usually not as bad as the stories suggest. Being publicly embarrassed at least once because of an inability to answer a question is probably inevitable, but most students do not get publicly flogged and go on to become successful in law school and in the practice of law.

Is law school competitive?

While each law school has its own culture and some are more competitive than others, almost all law schools can be called competitive to some extent. People who attend law school are usually competitive by nature, and the mere fact of having a large group of competitive people together makes the experience itself competitive. Law students are generally very intelligent people who were at the top of their undergraduate classes. This is often the first time that they are not “one of the smartest people in class” and that they have to compete for top grades and recognition. This experience can often heighten the competition factor, making people even more competitive than they were in college.

What are the exams like?

Most classes have only one exam – the final. This means that your grade in a class is totally dependent on how well you do on that one exam. Obviously, this causes a lot of stress for students, but if you study throughout the semester, do all the work required of you and study for the final, you will probably do fine. Most students report being exceptionally stressed their first semester, but they adjust to the pressure after that.

For more information on what to expect during the first year of law school, visit the following web site:

<http://www.ilrg.com/glasser.html> .



UNDERGRADUATE PREPARATION

So you have decided that law is a good fit for you. That's great! Let's talk about how you can prepare for law school while you are an undergraduate. The most important thing to remember is:

IT'S NEVER TOO EARLY TO START PREPARING!!!!



Don't be late, set a date – START TODAY!

What do you think is the most common question asked about undergraduate preparation for law school?

- “What is a lawyer?”
- “How much can I party as an undergrad?”
- “What should I major in?”

The answer, of course, is **c** “What should I major in?” There is **no designated pre-law major** at the University of Pittsburgh, nor is there a major that someone “should” major in if they are thinking about law school. Many people mistakenly believe that they should major in political science if they want to go to law school. While political science is a possible major for the pre-law student, it is by all means not the only major or even the “best major” for all pre-law students. Law school admissions representatives do not look for any particular major when making admissions decisions; rather, there are more important pieces of information about you in which they are interested. One piece of information that is particularly important is your QPA. It is well known that if you like your major you will do better in your classes and get better grades, thus enhancing your QPA. Therefore, major in something you enjoy! If you are intrigued by anthropology, declare that as your major. If you love biology, by all means major in biology. Many pre-law students choose a School of Arts and Sciences (A&S) major, but it is not necessary to have an A&S major to go to law school. There are Pitt alumni who have applied and been admitted to law school with majors as varied as engineering, nursing, or business.

Regardless of what you major in, there are certain skills that the pre-law student should develop in his or her undergraduate years. Developing and demonstrating these skills will make you a well rounded applicant and will help to increase your chances of being admitted to law school.

- ✓ **Reading:** Reading cases, reading documents, reading and research... That is the life of a law student and a lawyer. Improve your reading abilities now since you will be reading a significant amount of once you begin law school.

Classes/majors that will involve this skill: History, Philosophy, other Humanities majors, and any Honors College class

Activities that will involve this skill: Read books, newspapers, magazines - anything that will challenge your current reading ability



- ✓ **Writing:** Law school admissions representatives consistently report that writing skills are where many applicants have difficulties. Take as many writing intensive courses as you can to improve your writing skills and demonstrate that you have the writing abilities law school admissions representatives are seeking.

Classes/majors: Philosophy, English Writing, English Literature, History, Legal Writing, and any Honors College class.

Activities: Write for the Pitt News, do a PR internship, volunteer to write newsletters for any organization to which you belong.

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- ✓ **Critical Thinking and Analytical Reasoning:** Law requires people to think critically about issues, apply theories to situations, create and evaluate arguments about issues, and separate the important details from less important details. These skills can be described as critical thinking skills and should be honed in your undergraduate preparation.

Classes/majors: Anthropology, Political Science, Philosophy, History, Economics, Film Studies, Computer Sciences, and any Honors College class.

Activities: Mock Trial Team, Debate Team, Independent Research in your field of interest.

- ✓ **Problem Solving:** Much of your experience in law school and the legal profession will involve solving problems for your clients. This involves critical thinking/analytical reasoning skills outlined above as well as the ability to determine what the problem is, appropriate options to solve it, and an analysis of the pros and cons of the different problem solution options.

Classes/majors: Economics, Philosophy, Business, Information Science, Biology (or other sciences), and Engineering.

Activities: Independent Research in your field of interest, group projects involving problem analysis and creating solutions.

- ✓ **Verbal Communication:** The ability to verbally communicate and speak persuasively is another important skill for law school and the practice of law.

Select classes/majors: Communications, Public Speaking, any class that requires presentations.

Select activities: Mock Trial Team, Debate Team, Toastmasters.

- ✓ **General Research Skills:** Since research forms the basis of the practice of law, it is imperative that lawyers have strong research skills. Prepare yourself for law school by engaging in as much research as you can while you are an undergraduate student, even if this requires you to do work above and beyond your class requirements.

Classes/majors: Psychology, Chemistry (or other sciences), English Literature, and any class where you have to write comprehensive research papers.

Activities: Brackenridge Fellowships, Independent Research in your field of interest, assist professors or graduate students with their research, preparation of reports for an employer or an internship.

There is one more characteristic that is not really a skill, but more of a **VALUE – the value of serving others and promoting justice.** If you have a record of devoting effort towards helping others, it shows law school admissions committees that you share similar values upon which the legal profession was founded.

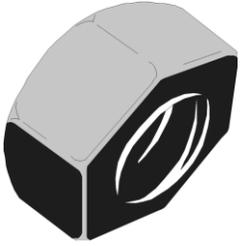
Classes/majors: Psychology, Sociology, and Social Work

Activities: Volunteering -either on your own, through a student group, or through the Student Volunteer Outreach Program.

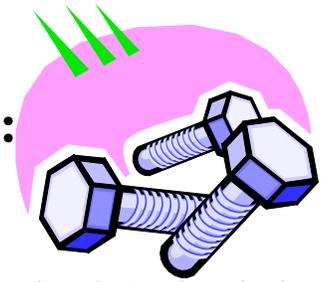


If your major and the classes that you take help you to develop the above skills and values listed above, you will be better prepared for law school and will likely be more successful in the law school application process. However, preparation for law school is not limited to what classes you take or what you choose as a major. It is also important for you to get involved on campus or in the community while you are completing your undergraduate degree. Law schools much prefer people who were involved while also maintaining high grades – it shows that they can manage multiple responsibilities well. Get involved in activities that will distinguish you from the rest of the population of law school applicants. This may mean that you travel abroad, maintain
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interesting employment, or develop your leadership skills by running for office or chairing a committee in an organization. Whatever you choose – do it fully and do it well!

The most important piece of advice to take away from this section is that ***there is not one recommended major for students interested in attending law school.*** Frankly, your QPA is much more important than what you major in, so choose classes and a major that interest you. Do well in your classes, “stretch” yourself academically to develop and improve the above skills, find activities or organizations to get involved with, and have a little fun too!



The Law School Application Process: Nuts & Bolts



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Now that we have explored law and law school, and examined undergraduate preparation, let's take a look at the application process. This is the “nitty-gritty” of the application process – everything you need to know about HOW to apply to law school.

The LSAT

The Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) is a three-and-a-half hour standardized multiple choice test that predicts an individual's ability to succeed in the first year of law school. The LSAT is weighted heavily in law school admissions decisions because it is a standardized test that accurately compares students' abilities on the same scale. Undergraduate institutions have varying GPA scales and grading practices that make it difficult to compare students from different schools. Since every student who applies to law school takes the LSAT, each law school has a standardized scale upon which to compare their applicants. While each law school may assign a different degree of importance to the LSAT score, most law schools agree that the LSAT is one of the most important objective pieces of information they have about an applicant. Therefore, it is important that each student do the best that he or she can do on this important measure.

What is on the LSAT?

The LSAT consists of five 35-minute sections including:

Two sections of **logical thinking** (aka “arguments”) (25-26 questions each)

- Arguments test your ability to understand, analyze and criticize an argument.

One section of **reading comprehension** (27-28 questions; approximately 4 passages, 6-8 questions per passage)

- This section requires you to read passages and answer questions about them.

One section of **analytical reasoning** (aka “games”) (24 questions; approximately 4 games and 5-8 questions per game)

- Analytical reasoning questions are like complex word puzzles. Incomplete sets of information are given to you, and you have to solve the puzzle.

One unscored experimental section (any of the above sections)

- This section contains questions that are being pre-tested for inclusion on future exams. You will not be told which section is the experimental section, but your performance on it will not impact your score.

There is also a 35 minute writing sample section where you will be given the opportunity to write an essay on an assigned topic. Usually, you are asked to read an argument and support one of two sides of that argument or to evaluate the line of reasoning and use of evidence presented in the passage. The writing sample is not scored, but it is supplied to all the law schools to which you apply.

How is the LSAT scored?

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Scores on the LSAT range from 120 (lowest) to 180 (highest); 150 is the average. A percentile rank is also reported for each LSAT score, reflecting the percentage of candidates scoring below your reported test score.

How should I prepare for the LSAT?

Because the LSAT is an important component to law school admissions decisions, your preparation is vital. This is NOT a test that you take unprepared! It is recommended that you prepare for the LSAT approximately 2-6 months before you take the examination. LSAT preparation takes many forms, including:

Sample tests

At the very minimum you should take timed sample LSAT tests. Sit down in a quiet place with a timer and take a full-length timed practice test. Most people report having difficulties adjusting to the timed nature of the exam. Remember, you only have 35 minutes to complete each section. Take as many practice tests and sample sections as possible to get used to working quickly. You will find a sample test in the back of the LSAT information book and on the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) web site: <http://www.lsac.org>.

Test preparation guides

There are several LSAT test preparation guides available for purchase in most major bookstores. These guides describe the different question types, give suggestions for answering each question type, have sample questions and explanations of right and wrong answers, and usually have at least one full-length practice test. The guides are relatively inexpensive (\$18 - \$25) and are a good option for people with a good amount of discipline – those who will actually use the books that they purchase. In addition, you may choose to purchase previously administered LSAT tests (PrepTest) from LSAC. These preparation materials contain complete LSAT tests, writing sample, answer key, and a score conversion table. The cost ranges from \$8 for one test to \$30 dollars for 10 tests.

Formal test preparation workshops

There are a variety of test preparation workshops available for the pre-law student. The most well known workshops are costly (approximately \$1,000) and provide approximately 30 hours of classroom instruction regarding LSAT preparation. The content of the preparation workshops is similar to the content found in the test preparation guides that can be purchased from major bookstores. Some students prefer the formal test preparation workshops because they do not require as much discipline and initiative to teach yourself the LSAT preparation concepts. Instead, you attend classes where an instructor teaches you the concepts and you practice with a group of other individuals who are applying to law school. Some students report increases in their LSAT practice test scores as a result of these workshops, while other students report no changes. If you are disciplined and can devote the same amount of time (approximately 30 hours) to your preparation, you may not need these workshops. For more information regarding the formalized workshops, visit their web sites or call their offices:

Kaplan Test Preparation:

<http://www.kaplan.com>

1-800-KAP-TEST

Local phone: 412-621-4620

The Princeton Review:

<http://www.review.com>

1-800-2-REVIEW

When should I take the LSAT?

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The LSAT is offered in June, October, December, and February. The best time to take the LSAT is either June or October of the year before you plan to begin law school. If you are planning to begin law school directly after undergrad, you should take the LSAT in June after your junior year or October of your senior year. The fall semester of your senior year is often a very busy time, so you might have more time to prepare if you take it in June.

Should I take the LSAT more than once?

It is not advisable to take the LSAT more than once if you do not have to. Law schools do a variety of things with multiple LSAT scores. Some schools take the highest score, some take the most recent score, and some take the first score. However, a majority of schools average multiple scores, making subsequent score improvements less noticeable. If something happened to affect your LSAT performance (e.g., your grandma died the week before, you were in a car accident on the way there, you had a terrible cold, or experienced some sort of catastrophe), it makes sense to re-take the test. However, if you prepared as much as you could and felt as confident as is possible before an important exam, then re-taking the LSAT is not likely to alter your score that much. Many people re-take the LSAT with the intentions of studying more for it the second time, only to get busy and find that they do not study anymore and end up with the same or a similar score. If you do take it a second time, make it a priority to devote extra time to prepare.

How long are my scores good for?

LSAT scores are good for **five** years, although some schools prefer to see scores that are no more than three years old. If you plan to take off only a year or two, it might be better to take the LSAT while you are still in college and still in the “study-mode.” Once you leave school and begin working full-time, it is much more difficult to find time to study and prepare for the LSAT. If you plan on taking three or more years off before applying to law school, you should probably wait and take the LSAT closer to the time that you will be applying.

LSDAS

The Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS) is a service sponsored by LSAC that collects some of your law school application data to streamline the application process. **Almost** all law schools require students be registered with LSDAS. Registration is separate from and in addition to the LSAT registration. Both the LSAT and LSDAS have registration fees associated with them.

- For information regarding the fees associated with LSDAS or LSAT, please see the LSAC web site, <http://www.lsac.org>.

The LSDAS collects your LSAT score, your letters of recommendation, and your transcripts and assembles them into a report that they send to the law schools to which you apply.

Step 1: When you take the LSAT your score is automatically sent to LSDAS. It is recorded in the reports for which you have paid.

Step 2: You should request that your letters of recommendation be sent to LSDAS where they are copied and entered into the reports.

Step 3: Have your transcripts sent to LSDAS where they are also copied and placed into the reports.

Step 4: You will send your application and personal statement to the law schools to which you are applying.

Step 5: Once the law schools receive your application packet, they will request a copy of your report from LSDAS, whereupon the law schools will receive the rest of your application materials.

Sounds complicated, doesn't it? For more information regarding LSDAS, read the LSAT/LSDAS information book, visit the LSAC web site (<http://www.lsac.org>) or make an appointment with the pre-law advisor by calling Career Services at 412-648-7130.

Letters of recommendation are important pieces of information for law school applications. A good letter can tip the scales in an average applicant's favor, and a poor letter can damage the picture of an outstanding applicant. So choose your letter writers wisely!

Who to ask

Most law schools require TWO letters of recommendation, but there are some schools that ask for three letters, so make sure to read the application materials carefully to determine how many letters to secure. The most important quality to seek in a letter writer is someone who knows you well. It does not matter if your letter writer is a lawyer, judge, or politician, or if they know anything about law or law school. A lot of law school applicants mistakenly think that a letter from someone familiar with the law would be better than a letter from someone who is not. However, it is much more important that your letter writer know you well and is able to comment on your academic abilities, scholastic achievements, work ethic, intelligence, or personal characteristics, rather than have an impressive title. It is important to clarify that your letter writer should know you on a professional or academic level, not a personal one. A personal letter should never replace a professional or academic letter. At the very minimum, you should have one faculty person, preferably from your major, write you a letter. You could also ask your supervisor from a part-time job or internship, another professor, a faculty or staff advisor from a student group in which you are active, or an advisor to a community organization of which you are a member.

Get to know your professors!

One of the biggest problems for students from a school the size of Pitt is that they do not get to know their professors. Don't be one of these students – get to know your professors and **DO IT EARLY!** Don't get caught during fall semester of your senior year with no one to write you a letter. A good letter will be from someone who has known you longer than one semester, so take more than one class from a professor you respect. Do well in your classes, participate frequently, utilize your professor's office hours, and communicate with the actual professor rather than just the TA. The same principle is true for other letter writers – get to know them, as well. The more the letter writer knows you, the more he or she can personalize your letter of recommendation and write a good one.

Ask early

Ask for your letters of recommendation **EARLY!** Most often, your letter writers will be working in an academic setting, which has definite busy and slow periods. As the semester progresses, people who work in universities get busier, and their time to write letters of recommendation becomes limited. As a courtesy, give your letter writers 6-8 weeks to write your letters, and even more time as it gets closer to the end of the semester. A good time to ask for your letters is EARLY in the first semester, in September or early October. Remember that October – December is filled with holidays, another roadblock to getting letters of recommendation completed, so try to give your letter writers more time if you are asking them during the holiday seasons.

What to give them

To help your letter writers write a stronger letter, include a resume that outlines what you have accomplished academically, professionally, and socially (i.e., include student organizations in which you were involved). Also include a transcript so that the letter writer can see how you have done in his or her class, as well as in your other classes. If you have completed your personal statement, give it to your letter writers. It will help them to know more about you and write a more personalized letter. You may also want to give your letter writer copies of papers, exams, or projects that you completed for his or her class so, he or she has more to remember you by. That means that you should start saving those things early! Have your letter writers send the recommendation directly to LSDAS rather than giving them back to you, and address an envelope to LSDAS so that you are assured that it gets to the correct location. Finally, include a stamp so that your letter writer does not have to pay for the postage.

- **Important!** You also want to give them the **REQUIRED** LSDAS letter of recommendation form (found on the LSAC web site: <http://www.lsac.org> . If this form is not included with the letter, LSAC will send the letter back to the writer, so make sure this is included!

Always send a note of thanks

Always, always, always thank your letter writers after they send your letter. A simple thank you note will do.

If you are waiting to apply...

If you are taking a few years off before applying to law school, finding someone to write you a letter of recommendation can be tricky. If you take off one or two years, you still should have one professor write you a letter. Identify whom you want to write that letter, ask him or her before you graduate, and ask them how they would like to handle the time lapse. Some professors will write the letter now and send it next year. The only problem with that is if they move or lose the letter, then you are short one letter of recommendation. A better strategy would be to ask your letter writer now, and **STAY IN TOUCH** with him or her for the next year. You can call, e-mail or visit in person **at least once a semester** so that he or she remembers who you are! If you take more than three years off, you will most likely **NOT** use a professor as one of your letter writers. If you still correspond with a professor then by all means, use him or her as a letter writer. Otherwise, you will probably want to use professional references – your supervisor, an old supervisor, etc.

Transcripts

You will also need to request that one **OFFICIAL** copy of your transcript from **EVERY COLLEGE YOU EVER ATTENDED** be sent to LSDAS. You need to have transcripts sent from every college – even if you took college classes while you were in high school, went to a community college, transferred the credits to another college, etc. Before you have your transcripts sent to LSDAS, it is a good idea to order a copy for yourself just to check it over to make sure there are no mistakes. Once you have reviewed it, you may request that the college send one official transcript to LSDAS.

Applications

This is the easy part. Most applications are similar to college applications – they ask for your name, address, social security number, major, QPA etc. The hardest thing about this part is trying to fit all your information into the space they provide. Good news on that front, many schools use online applications, where you can either download the application and fill it out on your PC and send it via regular mail, or complete it and submit it online! Voila! No more trying to fit five lines of information into a space designated for two lines. You can also use your LSAC online account for free access to all American Bar Association (ABA)-approved law school applications. This service will allow you to fill out the “common” information once (e.g., name, major etc.) and the web site inserts this information into all of the applications! However you choose to complete the applications, remember to **SPELL-CHECK!** Nothing looks worse than mistakes on an application. Not only should you proof-read your application, but have someone else proof-read it as well. We have a tendency to read what should be there, even if it is not.

Personal Statements

The personal statement may be the hardest part of the application process, so plan for this and begin your personal statement early! Many students leave this as the last thing they do, then they hurry through it and submit a weak personal statement. Don't let this happen to you! A personal statement is an important part of your application, since it gives the admissions committee insight into the “real you.” Most law schools do not grant interviews, so this is the only chance for you to tell the admissions committee about why you are so great!

Your personal statement is a chance for you to “shine!” It should only be positive – nothing negative should be in your personal statement. This is not the time to explain why you got a 2.1 your first semester in college, how your LSAT score does not adequately reflect your abilities, or the reason you had to withdraw from a class. Those issues should be dealt with separately, not in your personal statement. (See “How to handle “flaws” in your application” for tips about dealing with these types of issues.) Be positive and promote yourself well! Many people are uncomfortable writing positively about themselves – they think it’s “bragging,” or “conceited.” Think of your personal statement as your “marketing plan.” It is your chance to sell yourself to the admissions committee. Just as you would not buy a watch that was described as “pretty good, but it doesn’t keep time very well”, admissions committees will not select you if your marketing campaign doesn’t highlight your strengths and leave your weaknesses out.

Answer the question

It is important that you pay attention to what the law school asks you to write about and that you answer their question. If they ask you about your short-term and long-term goals, you should articulate what you hope to achieve in the next five years and in the next 25 years. There are two basic types of personal statements, each requiring drastically different information. Be sure to read all of your applications carefully in order to determine what each law school wants you to write about.

Law-specific personal statement

The law-specific personal statement asks you to discuss your interest in law school or in the legal profession. A typical question would be: “Please describe your reasons for wanting to study law” This specific question has variations including “Why do you want to study law at this school?” “How will a law school education further your personal and professional goals?” and “Please describe the influences in your life that have lead you to apply to law school.” These questions vary on the theme “Why law?” so you should answer by discussing your interests in law, reasons for applying, etc. Usually, this type of personal statement is easier because it gives structure to the writer.

General personal statement

It is not uncommon for law schools to give NO structure to the writer and simply say “write a personal statement” or “tell the admissions committee about yourself.” In this case, you DO NOT want to write “Why I want to be a lawyer” or “I want to go to law school because...” Instead, you want to write about YOURSELF! Assume that this will be like an interview and let the admissions committee learn about the real you. You may want to think about what characteristics you have that make you unique or different and write about those. You may choose to write about an experience that affected you. This type of experience could be personal (e.g., My parents got divorced when I was 12 and I had to work a part-time job to help support my family), academic (e.g., My public speaking class helped me to overcome my fear of giving speeches), or experiential (e.g., While studying abroad for one semester, I learned more about myself than I had in 20 years of my life).

Depth not Breadth

It is common for people to try to cover too much material in their personal statements. For instance, students want to include all of the activities in which they were involved, detailing their involvement and what they learned from them. (e.g., “I was president of the pre-law society where I... In my role as secretary of my fraternity I did... I was also involved in Student Government where I...”). Students do this to show admissions committees that they were involved and held leadership roles, something that admissions committees definitely need to know about. But, there are other more appropriate places to outline your activities. Usually there are sections on the application to list your campus and community involvement. You could also include this information on your resume. It is better to focus on one or two experiences, events or activities in your personal statement and discuss those in depth.



Focus on YOU!

Beware of spending too much time explaining your experiences, events, or activities in your personal statement. You do not want to spend the majority of your statement describing what you did. Instead, spend your time on how you were affected by the experience, how you changed or grew, what you learned from it, how it shaped your future. Remember, this is a personal statement – it is about YOU, not the events in your life.

Tell a story

Make your personal statement interesting by telling a story rather than just reporting on the event or experience you choose to write about. You need to grab the readers' attention and keep them interested in you. Admissions committees read thousands of personal statements each year – make yours stand out. Which of the following is more interesting to you?

Last year I studied abroad in Japan where I learned so much about freedom and independence. I had to find my own way around a foreign country without the help of family and friends, and I had to adjust to a new culture – one that expects women to be deferential...

"Excuse me, how much is this loaf of bread?" The man behind the counter ignored my question and helped the three men waiting beside me even though they came to the counter after I had. In Japan, women are expected to defer to men, something I had a difficult time getting used to as an exchange student from America. My experience in Japan allowed me to see the value of freedom and independence that I had always taken for granted...

Even though they say essentially the same thing, the second passage is more effective, as it makes the reader interested in learning more about this woman and beckons the reader to read further. Avoid the temptation to report your experiences (I did this, I do that, I am involved in this...) and instead paint a picture for the reader and draw him or her into your world. If you find yourself beginning most of your sentences with "I" it is time to stop writing and try to introduce some creativity into your personal statement.

Write and re-write

Writing a personal statement is a process. You should have several drafts; do not use the first statement you write EVEN IF YOU ARE A GOOD WRITER! Start out by making a list of adjectives or characteristics that describe you. Think about what makes you different from other students at the University of Pittsburgh. Brainstorm with a friend, family member, significant other, or the pre-law advisor if you are having trouble with this stage. Once you have a list of 8 – 10 characteristics, narrow that down to 4 or 5 that are best suited for law school or the practice of law. Think about experiences you have had that demonstrate those qualities and write those down too. Then write your first draft. Try to write as though you were in seventh grade again and doing a "free-writing" exercise for your English class. Do not evaluate whether or not this is good – it is a rough draft and meant to be ROUGH! Once you have your ideas on paper (or more likely on the computer) go back and make corrections so that the grammar is correct, your ideas flow together, etc. It is sometimes tempting to throw this draft away – resist this urge! Your statement is better than you think it is. Have someone else read it and give you suggestions for improving it. Once you have these suggestions, revise the statement and give it to someone else to read. It is really important to have an unbiased person read at least one draft of your personal statement, as those close to you think you are great and thus may not be able to give you accurate feedback. Ask a professor to read it, take it to the Writing Center, or bring it into the pre-law advisor for honest feedback. Take the suggestions from your unbiased reader and incorporate them into your statement. It is almost complete now, but do not forget this one last step! Have someone else read your last draft to make sure there are no spelling or grammar errors. You do not want to turn in a personal statement with any errors!

Got something in your past that you think will hurt your chances for getting accepted to law school? Rest assured, you are not the only one! It is quite common for people to have something that could be considered a “flaw” in their application. Usually it is grade- or LSAT-related and sounds a little like this:

“My freshman year I was a bio major because I thought I wanted to go to med school.

Well, I did terribly in those classes and got a 2.1 QPA.”

Or like this:

“I don’t test well. I only got a 145 on the LSAT.”



Don’t fret! There is a way to handle these situations. First, it is important to know that law school admissions representatives look for an upward trend in your grades. If you did less well in your earlier years and your grades progressively improved, that helps. So many people have difficulties adjusting to college, and those difficulties are usually reflected in their grades. Admissions representatives know this and usually take this into account.

Rather than assume that admissions committees will accept your application “flaws,” you should describe what happened. To do this, you can create an **addendum** for your application. You simply type the word “Addendum” at the top of a blank sheet of paper and in a short paragraph (aim for half of a page at the most) describe why the “flaw” occurred. One caveat though: This only works if you truly have a reason for the flaw. “I got a 2.1 my freshman year because I was partying too much” is not a good enough excuse. Here is an example that is much better:

“My freshman year grades were not as high as I would have liked because I was in a major that was not well suited for my skills. As you will note from my transcripts, once I switched majors, my grades improved dramatically. Therefore, my overall QPA does not accurately reflect my abilities. Without my freshman year grades, my overall QPA would be a 3.5, a much better representation of my abilities.”

Obviously, an addendum is better if it can be backed up with solid facts. Saying that you don’t test well and thus your LSAT score is not an accurate representation of your abilities is one thing, but backing that up with the fact that your SAT score was low (you would need the actual score) yet you got good grades in college shows the admissions committee that you indeed do not test well.

One of the most common questions is “When should I do all of this?” Below you will find a checklist/timeline to help you to determine when things should be done and to help you keep track of your law school application progress. Please note that this timeline is just a suggestion. Some people will find that they will do things in different order or at different times. Do what works for you, as long as you accomplish everything by the deadlines.

Junior Year

Throughout the Year

- _____ Get to know your professors and letter writers
- _____ Study for the LSAT

Fall Semester

- _____ Start researching law schools
-  Check-out law schools’ web sites
-  Attend Information Sessions

Winter Break and Spring Break

- _____ Visit law schools

Spring Semester

- _____ Take LSAT practice tests

April/May

- _____ Register for the LSAT and LSDAS
-  Registration materials are available from Career Services (224 WPU, Office of Measurement and Evaluation (G-35, CL) or on line at <http://www.lsac.org> .

June

- _____ Take LSAT
- _____ Start working on a personal statement
-  Bring to pre-law advisor, professors, or Writing Center for help

July/August

- _____ Receive LSAT score
- _____ Locate web-based applications on LSAC or law schools’ web sites
- _____ Begin to complete applications if they are available
- _____ Complete second draft of personal statement and seek feedback

Senior year

September

- _____ Complete application materials
 -  earlier the better, especially for financial aid
- _____ Meet with the pre-law advisor
- _____ Ask professors or supervisors to write letters of recommendation
- _____ Request transcripts from every college you ever attended and send to LSDAS

October

- _____ Take the LSAT if you did not take it in June.
 -  It is better to take it in October than in December!
- _____ Complete last draft of personal statement
- _____ Send in application materials as early as possible
 -  helps with chances of getting into school and also for financial aid
- _____ Thank professors for writing letters

November/December

- _____ Check to be sure applications are complete

January

- _____ File financial aid applications