

The Role of Style and Tone in the Personal Statement
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A conscientious law school admissions officer probably reads at least a thousand personal statements within a period of a few short weeks. Because of the sheer volume of this undertaking, lack of content or poor style can lessen interest in an applicant's statement.

The most common error we see is the attempt to impress. While it is understandable that the candidate wants to make an impression, his/her very eagerness to do so is what most often gets in the way of an honest, truly impressive essay. Some candidates become pretentious, pedantic - sometimes nearly ludicrous - in their choice of words and phrases. The following is an actual example:

"I have presented recommendations from legal education and business leaders in my community and adduce a level of motivation and acumen that you require. All of these qualities are touted as being the primary indicia of a successful law school applicant."

One can, of course, dig through the verbiage to get the sense of the candidate's message, but the candidate would have been wiser to write clearly. The impression the writer leaves is a negative one.

There are other common mistakes such as whining and pleading. Some students use the personal statement to launch a long "explanation" of low LSAT scores. While a paragraph or two may be well appropriate, a page or two is not, and leaves the sad impression that the candidate has little positive in his/her life. What we want to see is a picture of a whole person, not just a test-taker.

Some applicants seem to put very little time into writing their personal statements. A statement such as "I want to go to a law school because I would like to be a lawyer and find the study of law fascinating. I have had a keen interest in the law since I was ten years old" will not do. Likewise, but at the opposite extreme, we all get applicants who enclose lengthy term papers or even theses as a "sample of their writing." Perhaps they put time into that piece of writing but usually it has little or nothing to do with law school and is too long for us to read.

How refreshing it is to read an essay which gives us some background on why a person wants to go to law school, for instance here is an excerpt from an essay:

"Shortly after my return from Washington, DC in 1977, I was awarded a research fellowship from International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The purpose of this project was to develop an inventory of ecologically balanced, marine-based technologies. It was our ultimate goal to provide this information, in the form of technical assistance to the governments of coastal and island nations in the Pacific

Basin. During this project, I was given my first glimpse into the complex world of international law. On several occasions I was required to research and analyze provisions of the International Law of the Sea Treaty, conflicting or ill-defined international trade agreements, and complicated aspects of international patent and manufacturing licenses. As a result of this legal research, the project was able to create workable models for the technologies in our inventory. My work on this fellowship culminated with several published articles and an invitation to lecture on this subject in Japan."

This concerns the past - now what are the hopes or plans for the future? Later in the essay, the applicant wrote:

The preceding paragraphs have illustrated the extensive connection my education and work have had with the law. In retrospect, I believe that I would have been more effective in all of these activities if I had received formal legal training. I am certain that in the years to come, my pursuits will be no less related to the law than they are today. Therefore, I am convinced that law school and admission to the bar are the tools I need.

In sum, because we read so many essays, style should be clear, concise and honest! Elements of Style by Strunk and White is a fine resource book to recommend for students with questions on style or who have a tendency to ramble.

Students should ask an adviser to read over the final draft for clarity before typing and submitting the personal statement.