

Craft a Captivating Law School Personal Statement

Applicants should be specific and avoid melodrama.



The introductory paragraph is your opportunity to make a good first impression and grab the reader's attention.

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Once you have developed a compelling topic for your [law school](#) personal statement, the next challenge is writing it.

Here are five ways to create an essay with a strong beginning, middle and end.

1. Create an inviting doorway: As I tell my clients, the introductory paragraph is your opportunity to make a good first impression. The introduction should establish what you're going to write about, and convey to your reader the topic and idea you'll discuss.

Think of your first paragraph as an open door into the world of your essay. It should give your reader a sense of the place she's about to enter, while leaving enough room for her to explore as she continues to read.

For example: A history major's first sentence presented little-known details about the Battle of Waterloo to hook the reader's attention. This battle established his fascination with the idea that macro geopolitical events are grounded in the micro, individual level. He explained that this tension also drives his interest in law, which seeks to establish uniform regulations that are sometimes difficult to justly apply on a case-by-case basis.

The rest of the essay explored his academic and professional experiences as they related to the battle between the ideals of universal principles and the messiness of individual application. He gave the reader enough context to understand his worldview in the introduction, but continued to reveal new facets of his background and way of seeing from paragraph to paragraph.

You can and should be creative in finding the appropriate materials to construct your opening. Whether you start by sharing a formative personal experience, presenting an intellectual pursuit or creating a metaphorical representation, the goal is to intrigue the reader to enter the pages of your essay.

2. Be specific: A pitfall I often see in early essay drafts is relying on vague language to create a mystery that will hook the reader's attention. Vague language ends up exasperating more than it intrigues.

Take for example a sentence like, "It was the thing that changed my life forever." Words like "it" and "thing" are broad, while "forever" sounds both hyperbolic and cliché.

Concrete details and precise word choice tend to grab a reader's attention much more effectively. Consider the following revision: "The corrugated tin roofs of a shanty town in Johannesburg changed me."

There's still a sense of mystery in this sentence. What about the corrugated tin roofs was so impactful? Why was the writer in Johannesburg? How was he changed? But the mystery is grounded in specificity.

3. Avoid melodrama: Tone is important. You are writing a personal essay as part of an application to graduate study. There should be an essayistic quality to your voice.

While creativity adds value to a personal essay, be careful not to submit prose that reads like the next hot crime thriller. Trust that if you have developed a strong topic and idea, you will not need to resort to melodrama to hook the reader.

Think carefully about opening in present tense narrative or with dialogue. For example, "My heart is racing as I reach the podium" or "'Kellen, you love to argue so much, I just know you're going to be a lawyer when you grow up,' my mom said when I reasoned my way out of yet another household chore." Certainly there are successful openings that employ these techniques, but such devices can make your introduction feel more like a story than an essay.

4. Find your voice: Because the whole purpose of the personal statement is to illuminate who you are,

it is important to establish your voice from the get-go. For that reason, I caution against opening with a famous quote or epigraph.

Even if you plan to explain what the quote means in your own words, such openings are not only overly used in application essays, but also allow someone else to speak for you during the crucial first impression.

Likewise, if you are writing about an inspirational figure – an underprivileged child you encountered, a down-and-out client you worked with – make sure that you establish what this person means to you. Do not allow yourself to be overshadowed. Ultimately this essay is about who you are and how you see the world, not this other person. Frame your introduction in a way that establishes your relationship and the impact he or she had on you.

5. Conclude, but don't repeat: While applicants inherently understand the significance of a strong opening paragraph, too many forget that endings are equally important. Don't neglect the conclusion.

I often see a recount of what was already stated above. If an essay discussed leadership, community service and intellectual curiosity as qualities that make the applicant a strong law school candidate, the ending would be, "My leadership skills, community service and intellectual curiosity make me a strong law student." Such endings can feel formulaic or lazy.

Instead, I offer you this challenge. If your essay has wrestled with an idea, what final thought do you want to leave with your reader? Can you give your reader something to continue to contemplate?

Unsure how to open or close your personal statement? You can reach me at lawadmissionslowdown@usnews.com.