



CENTER FOR

**Pre-Law Advising**

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Personal Statement Brainstorming Exercises



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# About the Personal Statement

**Length:** 2-3 pages, double-spaced (some schools will have a page/word limit)

**Prompt:** Generally, along the lines of, “Tell the Admissions Committee about yourself and include anything that will aid them in making their decision”

What this boils down to: **WHY** do you want to go to law school  
**WHY** are you a good candidate  
**WHAT** will you do with a law degree

Your essay should address all three questions and include evidence, drawn from your personal experiences, to support your argument!

## Exercise 1: Talk it Out

For those who feel more comfortable communicating aloud, this technique can be extremely useful for getting started. Imagine that you are in an interview setting. The interviewer asks you, “**Why do you want to go to law school?**” Of course, you’ll want to answer the question, but to prove your answer, you’ll also **tell a story/give an example** of an experience you’ve had that illustrates your point. Try answering the question and telling this story aloud. Record your answer. Then, transcribe it exactly as you hear it onto a Word document and highlight the points that you make in one color, and the specific stories in another. If you like your answer, use these points to begin an outline of what your main points will be in your essay.

## Exercise 1: Example

“There are three reasons that I want to go to law school. First, a law degree will help me stand up for disadvantaged persons in the legal system; I realized this when I took a course about municipal housing and landlord-tenant disputes. Second, a legal education will compliment my leadership skills, such as public speaking, which I honed during my tenure as President of my fraternity. Third, law school will give me the opportunity to think deeply and interact with an intelligent and diverse community, which will prepare me for my professional goal of becoming a public interest lawyer.”

**Note:** Although this exercise will give you some good starting material, you’ll need to elaborate upon each reason and example that you’ve included, so you’re not merely reciting your resume!

## Exercise 2: Guided Free Writing

This is a great place to begin in order to channel your thoughts into the direction you want your paper to go.

**Step 1:** Begin by free writing (sentences, bullet points, fragments, whatever you're comfortable with) the answers to the following questions.

- Why do I *really* want to go to law school?
- What in my past experience has confirmed my commitment to law?
- What courses, professors, books, experiences have shaped me intellectually?
- If I've done undergraduate research related to law school, what research have I done? What have I learned from that research?
- What can I contribute or bring to this professional program/law school?
- What do I expect to do with the education that I'm hoping to receive?

## Exercise 2: Guided Free Writing

**Step 2:** Read through your answers and answer any follow-up questions that are left unresolved, such as:

- Why do I *really* want to go to law school? Sample answer: “To help people.”
  - **Follow-up:** Why? Why does law help me achieve this as opposed to another field?
- What in my past experience has confirmed my commitment to law? Sample answer: “My internship in the State Capitol”
  - **Follow-up:** How do these stories/examples illustrate that I am a good candidate for law school?
- What can I contribute or bring to this professional program/law school? Sample Answer: “I am a great writer, excellent team member, and compassionate.”
  - **Follow-up:** Do I have stories or experiences that I can use to illustrate the times when I have demonstrated these abilities?

## Exercise 2: Example (Adapted from an actual personal statement brainstorm)

### “Why do I really want to go to law school?”

- I am interested in science, but do not want to do research or go to medical school, and law school caters to my strengths (writing, critical thinking)
  - *Follow-up:* With a law degree, I can pursue the field of intellectual property and stay engaged in the scientific community, while pursuing pharmaceutical regulation/market control
- I am a decisive person who likes resolving ambiguities
  - *Follow-Up:* Law seeks to *answer* questions, other fields can be more nebulous and circular, such as research or public policy
- I value ethics, justice, and fairness
  - *Follow Up:* With a career in law, I can enter a profession dedicated to these three principles and try to ensure that they are present

*Again, this is just a starting point -- your actual statement will flesh out your answers, put them in a logical order, and provide examples and qualifying statements*

# Still stuck?

- Check out the Writing Center's "[Brainstorming Personal Statements](#)" form, or read their [handbook](#)
- Read CPLA's "[Brainstorming](#)" Entry in our Personal Statement Section, or check out our [Personal Statement Blog](#)
- Schedule an appointment and meet with an advisor to talk about your ideas!