



## Pre-Law Guide

### FRESHMAN & SOPHOMORE YEARS

#### *How can I decide if law school is for me?*

- Research the occupation. Books and websites detail specialty areas within the legal profession that can provide a solid foundation of what is attainable with a law degree.
- Speak with practicing lawyers. Ask them about a “typical day” and whether they enjoy their job. This will give you insight into the profession from those who are already there.
- Find an internship or part-time job in a law firm, government agency, etc. This gives you an up close and personal look into what it means to be a lawyer. Determine whether your personality and skills match those of the lawyers that you observe.

#### *Before you start applying, ask yourself...*

- Do I have a compelling interest in the law? An interest strong enough to withstand an extremely rigorous curriculum? An interest strong enough to withstand a sizable financial debt?
- Would a law degree increase my social, personal, and professional satisfaction?

#### *Reasons Not to Go*

- To please someone else. A considerable number of attorneys report a high level of dissatisfaction with their career. Not so surprising since they also report that the reason they went to law school is because someone else wanted them to go.
- Don't know what they want to do. If you do not know what you want to do, be careful of obtaining a degree that may not be applicable to the field you ultimately land in.
- To avoid the job hunt. Sooner or later you'll have to do it.

- Your favorite television shows are often surrounded by legal issues. You'd be amazed at the number of people that become interested in careers because of the glamorous representation they've viewed on television. Primetime rarely mimics life.

### **What is the best major for law school?**

According to the American Bar Association (ABA), "students who are successful in law school, and who become accomplished lawyers or use their legal education successfully in other areas of professional life, come to their legal education from widely differing educational and experiential backgrounds... Thus, the ABA does not recommend any particular group of undergraduate majors, or courses that should be taken by those wishing to prepare for legal education; developing such a list is neither possible nor desirable."

No specific undergraduate major is recommended. Your decision regarding a major should be based on personal desires and needs. One approach is to select a major that would prepare you for an occupation other than the law. You can pursue an alternative career in this manner and simultaneously be "preparing" for law school. This will allow you the option of foregoing a legal education for whatever reason or allow you to pursue an alternative career for a few years before entering law school, in order to gain experience and maturity. For example, it is not uncommon for students to choose a major in English, public policy, economics or psychology with the intentions of working for a few years before applying to law school.

The most important aspect of choosing a major are that (a) you choose it, not someone else, and (b) you enjoy the discipline and believe you can excel in this area academically. Why? A very important criterion for admission to law school is one's GPA (even when taking courses at other universities or community colleges). If you select a major based on what someone else wants you to do, there is a high likelihood that you will be unhappy, and your grades will reflect that dissatisfaction. Never choose a major based on the ease of attaining high grades, but it makes sense that you will likely not excel if you have no interest in the subject area.

If you are aware of the type of law you would like to practice, these are majors you might want to consider:

- Patent Law: Computer Science & Engineering
- Tax Law: Economics or Management
- Environmental Law: Earth Systems Science or Environmental

- Engineering
- Medical Law: Natural Sciences

### **What courses should I take?**

There are no specific undergraduate courses required by law schools. However, there are subject areas that are recommended by law schools from which students should consider taking at least one course sometime during their undergraduate education. These subject areas include literature, history, government, philosophy, language, psychology, sociology, economics and accounting.

Many courses that will be beneficial in law school are those typically required for graduation. For example, introductory courses in American history and government are essential. Writing and research intensive courses are also helpful. Other suggested classes would include those that develop or stimulate analytical thinking. Obvious choices in this field would be accounting, economics, math or engineering courses, but don't overlook music theory or English composition. Consider courses that focus on communication skills, such as speech or foreign language classes. Courses in introductory logic or arguments are also useful, as are many sociology and psychology classes.

### **What do I need to do now besides take classes?**

- Focus on your grades so that you'll have a competitive GPA.
- Get involved in extracurricular activities. Join a group on campus that interests you, take a part-time job, and or volunteer. If you become involved in a group as a freshman or sophomore, the chances for you to hold a leadership position as a junior or senior will greatly improve.
- Research the legal field as much as you can. Make sure that three years of law school will be worth your time, energy and money. Read about the law and talk with current law students and lawyers.
- Find an internship or volunteer. The better informed you are about the legal profession the happier you will be in law school. Internships are a great way to expand your resume and learn more about career fields.
- Get to know your professors and employers. Eventually, you will need to ask those that know you well for a letter of recommendation. Ideally, your recommenders will know something

about you that sets you apart from other law school applicants. This does not happen overnight, so start now.

## **JUNIOR YEAR**

### ***When should I take the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT)?***

The LSAT is administered four times a year – February, June, September and December. You should not take the test until you've finished your junior year. The ideal time to take the LSAT is in June before your senior year, simply because you typically won't be in school and should have plenty of time to investigate law schools before the application process begins. However, if you are taking time off before law school you may wait to take the LSAT until after graduation.

Do not take the LSAT for practice! All scores will be reported to every law school to which you apply for admission and most schools average your scores. Plan to take the LSAT only once.

- Register for the LSAT. You can register online through the Law School Admission Council ([www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)) or use the registration form included in the LSAT & LSDAS Registration and Information Book (found in the CSC Library). Register early in order to increase your chances of obtaining your first choice for a testing location.
- Start preparing for the LSAT early. There are a number of prep course options available, and CSC does not endorse one over the other. If you are disciplined, you may prepare by using self-study materials. Whatever method you decide on, be sure that you are prepared. Take as many mock LSAT tests under timed conditions as you can in a setting similar to your test location.

### ***What is LSDAS and do I have to register for it when I sign up to take the LSAT?***

The Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS) provides a means of centralizing and standardizing undergraduate academic records. LSDAS takes information from your transcripts and assembles your grades into a standard form called the Law School Report. Also, the LSDAS compiles your letters of recommendations and sends them along with the Law School Report to each school which you apply. You are responsible for submitting this information to LSDAS. While you aren't required to sign up for the LSDAS at the same time as the LSAT, a subscription is required by all law schools when you begin the application process. Go to the LSAC

website (<http://www.lsac.org>) for more information and to register for this service.

You do not need to tell the LSDAS where to send your report. Instead, the law schools will request your information after receiving the application. However, you must pay LSDAS for each report that will be requested. For example, if you are applying to five law schools, you need to make sure that you have paid for that many reports to be sent. These additional reports can be requested either online, by mail or phone.

## SENIOR YEAR

### ***Where can I get in?***

Pre-law students are invariably faced with the task of selecting which law schools to apply to. The question “What is the best law school?” is not always the most pertinent. The question is “What is the best law school for me?” however, takes into account the needs and desires of each student and allows for a better selection.

Some things that a student might consider in selecting a law school are:

**Location:** Is the law school located in the geographical area you prefer? How important is the geographical location to you, and why? What geographical area do you want to work in after graduating law school?

**Size:** Do you prefer a large (1,000 or greater), an intermediate (500-1000), or a small (500 or less) sized student body? The advantages of a large law school are a greater number of courses offered and diversified interests within the faculty. In a smaller law school there is usually closer contact with the faculty and a more relaxed ambiance within the student body.

**Student Body:** Any professional program is competitive. Some law schools are very competitive and have student bodies that are vocationally oriented and grade conscious. Others are less competitive and possess student bodies which might be classified as “more supportive.” The best way to find out about the student body of a law school is to visit the school and talk to the faculty and students. If possible, sit in on a few classes and talk with the students after class.

**Faculty:** What is the strength of the faculty of a particular law school? The law school's website will list the faculty along with their professional activities, publications, etc.

**Library:** Is the size of the law library adequate both in terms of holdings and space? Can students be accommodated during examination time? Does the library have computer facilities, wireless capabilities, etc.?

**Strengths:** Some applicants have an area of the law in which they are particularly interested – international law, environmental law, tax law, patent law, etc. If so, you should examine law school catalogs closely to find those that have faculty and curricular expertise in the areas of your particular interest.

**Cost:** Somewhere along the line, money will become an issue. Look at the total cost for three years of study. This estimate should include tuition, room and board, fees and expenses, insurance, and travel.

Assessing your chances of gaining admission to any particular law school requires a review of the most current admission data available. These are several resources to help you:

**ABA/LSAC Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools** - This book is available for purchase from LSAC, free on the LSAC website ([www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)). This handbook includes facts and information on all ABA-approved law schools in the country. Data such as admission results for prior applicants are helpful to see how others with your GPA and LSAT scores fared last year.

**Law school catalogs** – Some law schools don't print all of their admission results in the ABA/LSAC Official Guide; therefore, you can obtain an application booklet and/or catalog by contacting the law schools that you are interested in and requesting information. Most schools do have this available online.

What are "REACH," "TARGET," and "SAFETY" schools?

It is rare that an applicant will gain admission to all of the law schools they apply to. Therefore, it is helpful to make educated guesses based on three categories of prospects.

1. **REACH** – This is a law school where about 20% or less of the applicants with your GPA and LSAT scores were recently admitted.
2. **TARGET** – This is a law school where your GPA and LSAT scores are approximately the same as the medians for last year's entering

class. "Target" schools present at least a 50/50 chance of acceptance.

3. **SAFETY** – This is a law school where at least 80% of the applicants with your GPA and LSAT scores were admitted last year. Include several "safety" schools on your list due to the list due to the accelerating applicant pools in terms of quality.

It is important to apply in each range of schools to ensure you are accepted somewhere.

The best way to figure out if a particular law school is right for you would be to visit. Below you will find a list of potential questions that you could ask during your visit. Remember this list is not exhaustive.

*Questions concerning a law school's admissions process:*

1. Describe your review process for applicants' folders.
2. How did your applicant pool change last year and what projections are you making for this year?
3. With my grades and LSAT what would my chances of gaining admissions to your law school?
4. How do you evaluate the more subjective factors of an application and how important are they?
5. What advantages exist for applicants who apply early? What do you consider "early?"
6. When do you typically let applicants know your admission decisions?
7. (If state supported school) How do you treat residency status in the admissions process?
8. Do applicants with post-college work experience have an advantage over new college graduates?
9. What do you look for in the personal statement?
10. Can you give me examples of the kinds of recommendations that can make a difference?
11. What should I anticipate the cost to be in attending three years of your law school?
12. How do most of your students pay for law school?
13. How does your office handle financial aid awards? Can I expect to know my aid award before I'm required to pay a deposit?
14. What merit scholarships do you offer to incoming students?

*Questions about the character/ambiance of the law school:*

1. What are the curricular strengths of your faculty?
2. How are first-year classes organized and taught?
3. How many students are typically enrolled in each entering class?
4. How much (or what kinds) of contact with faculty would the typical law student have outside of class?
5. How many graduates practice law in your state (or region) after graduation?
6. What factors shape the career interests and options available to your graduates?
7. What complaints do your students have about your law school?
8. What is the atmosphere within your student body concerning competition?
9. How are students selected for your law school journals/reviews?
10. Can students leave their class books and notes in a study carrel without fear of theft?
11. When your students say what they like about your law school, what things are frequently mentioned?
12. When students turn down your school in favor of another, what reasons do they cite for doing so?
13. What features do you believe set your school apart from "comparable" schools?

*Questions concerning career outcomes:*

1. What is the job search experience like for your law school's graduates who want to work here in California?
2. How many (what percentage) of your graduates have their jobs lined up before Christmas of their final year?
3. To what extent do your students get their summer jobs through your on-campus recruiting program?
4. What kinds of jobs do your first year students line up for their first summer job?
5. To what extent does class rank affect your students' job search success?

**When do I ask for a Letter of Recommendation?**

Letters of recommendation are an extremely important piece of your law school application. Professors and other recommenders have the ability to support what you have already stated in other parts of the application and add more information about you as an applicant. Do not wait until the last minute to determine who to ask, it is always best to be the first person to ask a favorite professor than the last.



Q. Whom should I ask for letters of recommendation?

A. Always refer to the application for specific directions. Generally professors, supervisors, faculty advisors, teaching assistants and/or anyone else who is a non-relative are acceptable recommenders.

Q. What do I ask my recommenders to write?

A. The following are acceptable topic areas:

- Length of time and in what capacity the recommender has known you.
- Writing ability, speaking ability, and other academic strengths you possess.
- Advantages you may bring to law school.
- Capacity for original thought, growth potential and the ability to analyze and critically assess information.
- Special characteristics you may possess such as motivation, judgment, maturity, and creativity.

This information should be in the form of a letter, on letterhead, and with an original signature, unless otherwise specified in the application packet. Visit the Career Services Center for more information on setting up your letters of reference file.

- Your first contact should be early. It is not out of the question to give your recommender one to three months notice. Check in with them (occasionally) to gently remind them of your deadlines and to provide additional information, if needed.
- Provide each recommender with a folder including your: Instruction sheet (self-written) with information on how to get in touch with you, Letter of Reference Waiver Option form (provided by the CSC), Transcripts, Resume, Professional statement (if written), and Return envelopes (provided by the CSC)

### **What is a Personal Statement?**

Your personal statement has several functions in the law school application process. First, it serves as a writing sample. Secondly, most law schools do not have the ability to interview all their applicants, so the personal statement tends to replace the information usually learned during an interview. Lastly, the information can make your application seem less sterile and give it a more realistic edge.

Make sure to consider your audience when constructing your personal statement. With possibly thousands of statements to read, law school

admissions committee members may initially only give your personal statement a few minutes of attention. Consider carefully what the admissions committee needs to know about you in 500 words or less. Stray away from what they already know about you from the rest of your application (transcripts, LSAT score, letters of recommendation and resume) and tell them something more. In addition, consult each application carefully to determine what the law school wants. This could necessitate that you write several personal statements.

How do I come up with a topic for my personal statement?

- Free writing – pick out a personal characteristic and take 20 minutes to write about it.
- Journaling – keep a daily journal. It not only helps to determine a topic, but is also aids in forcing you to practice your writing.
- Chronological method – what is your earliest memory? Now, write down every significant memory since then.
- Accomplishments – make a list of accomplishments, big or small.
- Personal characteristics – make a list of your personal characteristics or skills.
- Ask family and friends – part of the difficulty in coming up with a topic is that you are probably uncomfortable with writing about yourself. Family and friends usually have no problems spouting off your accomplishments.
- Read the law school application, some law schools are explicit in what they prefer you to write about. Always follow the directions of each application carefully.

Making your personal statement stand out:

- Create an interesting first paragraph and/or summarize well.
- Choose a theme.
- Avoid gimmicks such as poetry, recipes, etc.
- Personalize your essay by not just relating what you did but why you did it and what impact the experience had on you.
- Explain how you broadened your horizons.
- Discuss your accomplishments in terms of the obstacles you overcame.
- Tell the admissions committee what you want them to know about you. Your essay may be creative and unique and should reflect your values and priorities.

- Individualize your personal statement by giving specific reasons for applying to that school, but do not just use the information found in their catalog.
- You want to always explain, not make excuses for, discrepancies or problems in your academic or personal record, but reserve this for an optional statement. Keep your personal statement positive.
- Follow the application directions precisely.
- Do not wait until the last minute to write your personal statement.
- Proofread again and again and again.

### ***Do law schools require a Resume?***

Many law school applications require a resume. The formatting and techniques that you use for your professional resume are also used for your resume submitted with your law school application. You will want to read your applications carefully to determine the appropriate information to include and the length of the resume that you submit (some law schools will accept up to 3 pages). Remember, many law schools do not grant interviews for applicants. You will want to give them as much information as possible on your resume. This means detailing your honors and awards, academic record, work and volunteer experiences, foreign language competencies, and study abroad/research opportunities that you have undertaken. More information on how to construct a resume can be found on the Center for Career & Professional Advancement website: <http://hire.ucmerced.edu/>.