Columbia University
School of General Studies
Pre-Law Handbook

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<tr>
<td>Begin investigating law schools; speak to friends, family, mentors, advisors</td>
<td>Finalize the decision to go to law school</td>
<td>Take June LSAT and/or register for October LSAT</td>
<td>Attend Law School Forum in NYC and campus events in October</td>
<td>Check application status if completed file confirmation is not received</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enroll in an undergraduate logic course</td>
<td>Research legal internship and volunteer opportunities with CCE</td>
<td>Write personal statement and addenda</td>
<td>Check with LSAC to assure letters of reference were submitted</td>
<td>File taxes and FAFSA: form available Jan. 1</td>
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<td>Attend law school admissions and financial aid meetings</td>
<td>Ask two faculty members to write reference letters</td>
<td>Review all transcripts &amp; LSAT score to make realistic decisions on schools</td>
<td>Take October LSAT if necessary</td>
<td>Complete financial aid forms and scholarship applications</td>
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<td><em>Remember to thank them</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Register &amp; send reference letters to LSAC</td>
<td>Get a free credit report to assure a good credit score for loans</td>
<td>Review financial aid options</td>
<td>Discuss law school decision with pre-law advisor</td>
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<td>Register EARLY for June/Oct. LSAT and apply for any fee waivers</td>
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<td>If wait-listed, contact pre-law advisor for guidance and submit additional materials</td>
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<td>Attend alumni law school &amp; attorney panels</td>
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<td>Notify all schools, recommenders and pre-law advisors of your decision</td>
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<td>Submit transcript with fall semester grades to LSAC &amp; law schools</td>
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<td>Meet with your pre-law advisor to plan your application</td>
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Before You Apply

Why Become a Lawyer?
Many lawyers will tell you that this is exactly the wrong question to ask. It’s too blunt. Rather than “do I want to be a lawyer,” ask yourself:

1. Why do I want to go to law school?
2. What sort of law do I want to work with?
3. Where do I see myself in 5 to 10 years?

This handbook will help you explore your law school options and craft successful applications.

Caveat Emptor
It takes the better part of a year and up to $1,000 to apply to law school. Most applicants apply to between six and nine schools per cycle: this is relatively few, so they should be well chosen, including “reach” and “safety” schools. You should have an idea of what you want from a school, as well as what you want it to do for you. Research is key to your strategy. As you craft your dossier, explore your options to find the environment that will be right for you, and that will make your application worth the effort and cost: *Sit in on classes, talk to alums in each field; know what you’re getting into.*

If you read law school prep books from bull market times, you will see phrases like “there is a law school for everybody,” and “top candidates have no trouble landing a high paying job.” The boom times ended in 2008. Does this mean you shouldn’t pursue law? Absolutely not. It just means do your due diligence, and adjust your expectations to the new professional landscape: inherited wisdom about how things work is no longer predictive. It is harder now than it used to be to fall into a six-figure job, but there remain plenty of meaningful legal jobs if you work consciously towards a well-articulated goal, and there are ways to structure and manage your debt. Having an end-game at the start will help you find a law school that is a good fit for you, and will help you plan your time and course choices to make you the most marketable candidate.

Questions you should have answers to:
- Where, geographically, do you want to work?
- Are you ok with big firm hours, or do you want a slower pace?
- How much debt are you able/willing to take on?
- How will your debt burden affect your freedom to choose fulfilling work?

What your pre-law advisor does:
- Reviews drafts of personal statements, diversity statements and addenda;
- Provides law school information, further resources and feedback;
- Helps you with your application goals, strategy and self-presentation;
- Sponsors the GS Pre-law listserv: gsprelawstudents@columbia.edu;
- Organizes pre-law workshops.
What You Can Do Now: Strategies for Your Undergraduate Years

What You Can Do Now
Register with the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC). When you are ready to apply, you can activate the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS), which will be your law school application portal. You should register before you apply in order to access information you will need in order to take the LSAT and apply. This will be your total law school application portal. Access lasts for five years.

Register for the optional Candidate Referral Service (CRS), which will make your information available to recruiters. If you opt in, the CRS will share your name, address, phone number, and demographic information with law schools who may then contact you; law schools may not share or sell your information. The CRS may introduce you to schools and scholarship opportunities you would not otherwise know existed, schools that by virtue of contacting you are looking for people like you.

- Mark your calendar with law school forums and recruiting events.
  - The LSAC Northeast Recruitment calendar.
  - CU/GS events can be followed with the RSS feed.
- Consider interning at a law firm or legal service; it shows good faith.
  - The Center for Career Education (CCE) can help identify appropriate opportunities. Learn more here: gs.columbia.edu/students-considering-legal-profession.
- Interview or shadow a practicing lawyer.
  - Columbia Career Connections can put you in touch with practicing alums.
- Join one of the many pre-law organizations on campus.
- Consult a pre-law advisor (appointments can be made online and questions directed to gsprelaw@columbia.edu).
- Join the pre-law listserv: gsprelawstudents@columbia.edu.

Your Major
Law schools do not require a specific major, and Columbia, like many of its peer institutions, does not offer a pre-law major. This is because the skills required for law school will be covered by a rigorous liberal arts education such as that offered by Columbia.

The American Bar Association’s (ABA) statement on pre-law declares that "the ABA does not recommend any [particular] undergraduate majors or group of courses to prepare for a legal education," though it does single out for notice "history, English, philosophy, political science, economics or business." Does this mean these are favored? Not necessarily. According to the ABA, majors "as diverse as art, music, science and mathematics, computer science, engineering, nursing or education" can all lead to law. In fact, if you wish to practice in a specialized area of law, a specialized major will help you professionally (e.g. Middle Eastern Studies and international law) in the long term.

In reality, what law schools prize is rigor. Show by your course load that you do not shy away from a challenge. This means, if your major offers a thesis, do it, and if you have room for electives, consider cross-registering in one of Columbia's graduate schools. Most importantly, take the upper-level courses in your major: do not skate by on 2000 and 3000 level courses if you can handle more. Show growth. See also the ABA statement on pre-law.
Practical Implications
Limit your use of the P/D/F options and Ws. Excessive ungraded coursework will require explanation and may imply a pattern of taking on more than you can handle.

Recommended courses at Columbia, regardless of your major:
- Political Science v3285: Freedom of Speech and Press
- Philosophy v3411: Symbolic Logic
- Philosophy v1401: Introduction to Logic

See also:
- Justice with Michael Sandel.
- There are many MOOCs available online in logic, law and law-related fields as well through Coursera, EdX and other websites.
- There are also many LSAT prep apps available for smartphones and tablets, and these can be a great way to practice logic games in particular.

GPA
The LSAC Credential Assembly Service (CAS) will consolidate all your academic work into a single Academic Summary Report. The LSAC converts all grades to a uniform 4.0 scale. GPA is computed (1) for each academic year, (2) cumulatively for each institution, and (3) cumulatively for your whole undergraduate career, across institutions. This allows (upward) trends to be easily spotted. Every course graded on a 4.0 scale on each transcript contributes to your GPA. \[ \text{GPA} = \text{grade} \times \text{semester hours/period of time (year, degree, career)} \].

Other kinds of credit are excluded, for example:
- AP, P, INC, and W
  - Note: The LSAC considers that Ws "signify failure" but are "non-punitive," meaning they will be tallied but not contribute to your Summary GPA. Ws and failing grades should be addressed in addenda.
- Repeated courses will count towards GPA when graded. Columbia counts the first grade of a repeated course but grants credit for the second, when passed. This means that your original (presumably worse) grade is the one that will contribute to your LSAC GPA.
- Academic Honors (PBK, Dean's List, cum laude, etc.) and discipline (suspension, dismissal) will be noted when these appear on the transcript.
  - Note: Columbia does not provide class rank or class size information.
- Transfer credits to Columbia will not affect your Columbia GPA, but will count towards your LSAC GPA in the context of the institution where you earned them.
- Foreign institutions: If you have studied for a year or more in another country prior to Columbia or as a dual-degree candidate, you will receive an International Credential Evaluation. It will include (1) a mean GPA for the institution, (2) your US-equivalent grades and an overall verdict on your work there, from "Superior" to "Below Average," (3) your class rank, and (4) the name of your “bachelor equivalent” degree.
For your degree school, the LSAC will report (1) what percent of graduates apply to law school, and (2) GPA ranges for everyone who applied to law school from your undergraduate institution for the last three years. For each institution, LSAC will report your percentile relative to the previous three years of applicants from each school. When submitting transcripts, include every institution you’ve ever attended, including study-abroad and non-degree programs.

Once LSAC has summarized your credentials, you may view your Master Law School Report online. Check it for accuracy and contact LSAC if you notice anything wrong. Law schools will request this report from LSAC when they consider your candidacy.

**Your Admissions Index = LSAT x GPA**

This is the foot in the door, the crude quantitative level at which you enter the applicant pool. Qualitative factors can adjust this, but the core of your application is quantitative. The LSAC considers your Admissions Index to be predictive of your success in law school; it is not unequivocally accepted by all law schools, who tailor this crude number to their criteria by weighting the formula. What are the constants? This is privileged and institution-specific information, as it expresses what admissions offices are looking for in a given cycle. You may inquire what qualities and achievements schools prefer, and a good way to get a sense of what schools are looking for is to attend forums and panels where you can ask admissions officers directly about how they shape their cohorts.

The moral of the story is that your first impression as an applicant is not subjective, but an objective and predictive number, your Admissions Index. To maximize your appeal, get its components--LSAT and GPA--as high as possible:

- High GPA + High LSAT = Good
- High GPA + Low LSAT = Not Bad
- Low GPA + High LSAT = Better
- Low GPA + Low LSAT = Bad

The Admissions Process can therefore be represented by the following formula:

\[
\text{Admissions Index} = \text{LSAT} \times \text{GPA} + \text{Subjective Factors} (\text{incl. personal statement, resume, diversity statement, short answers}) - \text{Unexplained Factors} + \text{Addenda} = \text{Admissions (and Financial Aid) Decision}
\]

If you are objectively in the middle of the pack subjective factors are key: the prestige of your school, the difficulty of your program, a compelling personal story, or an upward trend. Most people will be in this category, so the trick is to differentiate yourself. As importantly, adjust your school choices from the ideal to the possible, and plan around those possibilities.
The LSAT

The format of the LSAT is five 35-minute sections, four of which count towards your score (range: 120–80). The LSAT is the essential skills test for law school, measuring your ability to “read and comprehend complex texts with accuracy and insight,” “organize and manage information,” and “draw reasonable inferences from it, think critically and analyze and evaluate the reasoning and arguments of others.”¹ It is offered four times per year, in June, September/October, December, and February. The LSAT is not a pure aptitude test, and you can significantly improve your score by practicing with the test. LSAT information and dates and deadlines are available on the website.

The test consists of:

1. Two sections of argumentation
   - **Format**: Questions are based on a series of statements and test your ability to identify relationships and use the kind of deductive reasoning valued in legal problem-solving.
2. One section of logic games
   - **Format**: Each question is based on a short passage and tests your ability to form valid conclusions.
3. One section of reading comprehension
   - **Format**: Four passages with corresponding sets of five-eight questions testing reading and reasoning.
4. One experimental section (unmarked, not counted)
5. One two-page writing sample
   - **Format**: This is ungraded but forwarded to schools with your score report. Take this section seriously, as it functions as a check on your personal statement, and frivolous responses will count against you.

How to Prepare

Take one sample test at a leisurely pace, then work up to taking tests in real time. Your study strategy should be based on the test format: get a baseline of your best performance under ideal circumstances, then train to work well within the time limit. It is better to prepare at a low level of intensity for a longer time than to cram: set aside time. The majority of test takers surveyed had studied for at least six weeks by test day. We do not endorse any particular test prep program: if you feel you would benefit from a structured program of preparation, there are many options. Note that some programs offer scholarships if you have financial need, and will extend discounts to Columbia students.

The best time to take the LSAT is not a particular date, but **when you are ready**. That said, if you plan far enough out, aim to take the June test so that you can retake in October if necessary. This will enable you to finish your applications in November in time for Early Decision, and early in the admissions season before most seats in incoming classes are filled.

Test Day
When you take the test, know that there is no penalty for guessing, and that you can use the process of elimination. There is also no order of difficulty on the LSAT, so do the questions you can first within a section, and return to those you had difficulty with the first time around. If you experience any anomaly in the conditions of the test, such as a noise disturbance, ask the test proctor to place a note in your file, which will become part of your LSAC dossier and visible to schools evaluating your scores. If you feel your scores have been compromised, you may cancel them within six days of the test. See instructions on how to cancel.

You will need to bring a current government-issued photo ID displaying your signature and test admission ticket. Very few other items are permitted in the testing room. Check this list of acceptable forms of ID and items allowed into the test.

Accommodations for Disability
The LSAC considers accommodation requests after you have registered for an LSAT. Work with ODS at Columbia to make your requests using the Accommodations Request Packet as soon as possible.

- LSAC Accommodated Testing Resources.
- ODS at Columbia.

Reporting
Turn-around time for the score report is approximately three weeks by email, down from six weeks in the days of paper reporting.

- The Raw Score tells how you did relative to the other test takers on your test date.
- The Scaled Score is your score relative to all LSAT administrations. The existence of the scaled score means it is not better to take one test date over another; take the test when you are ready, preferably in time to submit your applications by November (i.e. in June or October), when cohort seats are not nearly filled. This is true even of schools with rolling admissions: the earlier you apply the better chance you have, because you are fighting for all the seats, not the remaining seats. Further, many schools allot financial aid and scholarships on a first-come first-serve basis as well.

Though the LSAC considers the average of all LSAT scores to be the best predictor of performance, multiple scores are treated differently by different schools. For each score, the LSAC reports a Score Band, which is something like a margin of error and at the same time your adjusted score range.
The Application Process

Choosing a School
The heart of the application process is finding a school that fits, or, rather, finding six to nine schools that could fit. When determining where to apply, you will have to weigh your means, preferences, and goals against each other. When choosing your schools, recall undergraduate application strategies and distribute your risk across schools: two to three “reach” schools (i.e. you are at the low end of the score ranges of the previous year's admitted applicants), two to three “competitive” schools (i.e. you are in the middle to high end of their distribution), and two to three “safety” schools (i.e. your scores are at the high end or above the range of their admitted applicants, or they are less selective). This strategy gives you the possibility of going to a dream school, the probability of going to a school that is a predictably good fit, and a likelihood of being offered funds to study at a school where you would be the big fish. How do you know which schools are your reach, competitive and safeties?

1. Use the NAPLA Law School Locator.
2. Or the LSAC GPA + LSAT-based Law School search tool.
3. You can also browse the advanced degree (Ph.D., S.JD.) offerings at a school to get a sense of its strengths and emphases.

ABA accreditation of your school is, with few exceptions, your way of accessing state Bar exams. In most states, you cannot be admitted to the Bar if you have not attended an accredited school. See the New York State Bar Examination.

Full or Part Time?
About half of law schools offer part-time day and evening programs, which take longer to complete than a full-time program. Less than 20 percent of law students attend part-time, and the conventional wisdom is that you should go full-time, if possible, to take advantage of all opportunities. Clinical experience, extracurriculars, and networking all play into professional success, and part-time programs tend not to offer “the full experience.” If it is part-time or bust, choose programs carefully: with the contraction of the legal market, curricula and programming are evolving quickly, and you should be able to find something academically and experientially robust that still meets your personal needs. Use the Boston College part-time law school locator.

Your Application
Your application will be assembled and submitted exclusively through the Law School Data Assembly Service and will consist of:

1. Your undergraduate Academic Summary
2. Copies of all your academic transcripts
3. LSAT scores and your (ungraded) writing sample
4. Two to three letters of reference
5. Personal statement
6. Resume
7. Addenda (optional)
8. Diversity statement (optional)
9. School-specific short answer questions

The objective portion of your application consists of the LSAT, GPA, and your Applicant Index.
The subjective portion of your application consists of the personal statement, letters of reference, resume, addenda, diversity statement and any school-specific questions.

Once LSAC has summarized your transcripts, you will be able to view your Academic Summary online. Check it for accuracy! These materials will live on www.LSAC.org for five years. The address of LSAC’s Credential Assembly Service (CAS) is: 662 Penn Street, Box 2000M, Newtown, PA, 18940-0993.

**Application Criteria**

This list is adapted from the CSA pre-law manual (p.31), and was developed (in part) in the Law School Admissions Council publication, *The Art and Science of Law School Admission Decision-Making*. It is not meant to be all-inclusive, but to give you a sense of the criteria that factor into the evaluation of applications in general.

- **Academic:** LSAT scores, undergraduate GPA, major, advanced work/advanced degrees, difficulty of college coursework, grade trends, quality of high school, other test scores;
- **Demographic/Diversity:** Age, gender, race/ethnicity, geographic residence, socioeconomic background, religion, multicultural experiences, first-generation college student, English as a second language, family responsibilities/work during school;
- **Work experience:** Position, level of responsibility, full or part time, years’ experience, industry, previous law experience, military service, internships;
- **Leadership/accomplishments:** School or community leadership positions, special talents/skills, overcoming adversity, helping others overcome hardship, extracurriculars, study or residence abroad;
- **Other:** Writing ability, planning ability, communication skills, analytical and advocacy skills, problem-solving skills.

**Application Costs**

All told, it costs about $1,000 to participate in an application cycle, including:

- $160 to take the LSAT
- $155 Credential Assembly Service fee:
  - Includes four letters of recommendation, four evaluations, and access to law school applications for five years. *All materials must be submitted using the CAS, or they will not be considered.*
- $21 CAS dossier fee per application
- $40-100 per school in application fees

The LSAC will freeze your applications and levy a penalty in the event of a stopped payment for any of its services. Fee waivers are available by request to LSAC and require supporting documentation, including tax returns. Fee waivers cover two LSATs and four applications in two years. The LSAC requires that you request the fee waiver before you register with the CAS.

**The Personal Statement**

Your Admissions Index (GPA x LSAT) is your foot in the door: it gives the hard or objective factors that prove you can do the work at the institution to which you are applying. The subjective portions of the application, including the resume and personal statement, are your opportunity to show the school that they

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want to have you as part of their community, that you can not only do the work, but will add value by your presence. These “soft” or subjective portions of the application can swing the door open or slam it shut. The personal statement, in particular, is your chance to tell a story that will make sense of your application to law school and, more importantly, make you interesting to the admissions officer. In the words of one recruiter, it is your chance to make the committee “want to have coffee with you.”

Personal statements are hard to write. Some common pitfalls of the personal statement are:

- Treating it like a prose resume;
- Trying to say too much: the representative episode is infinitely more memorable than a quick and dirty life story;
- Trying to be funny or too clever (well executed humor is priceless, but in this medium it is not worth the risk);
- Sounding juvenile;
- Being divisive or political: no manifestos. Remember, it is a first impression;
- Bad style, including legalese and passive voice.

Given all these pitfalls, how do you tame the beast of the personal statement, and what should it be anyway? One admissions officer from a Top-20 school recently said it should basically be a humblebrag: hint at your achievements but do not be arrogant, make sense of your application without talking about it cynically or as destiny. It is a hard balance to strike in two pages, and it can be hard to know where to start. If you are stuck—if no episode, motive or inspiration jumps out at you and you just think law is something you would be good at, would enjoy, and that would help you make a living—work with your advisor to craft a statement. You need not have survived a tragedy or overcome huge adversity to apply to law school, and these can be the hardest essays to write. If you do not have a positive narrative for why, specifically, you are going to law school, use your essay to differentiate yourself from the crowd.

Some starting points for brainstorming:

- (Early) life, school or work experiences;
- Mastering an obstacle or disadvantage;
- Something that motivates you or testifies to a quality you want to advertise;
- Your personal philosophy or something unique about you.

Most importantly, have a hook: make sure paragraph one engages the reader with a compelling image, episode or problem, but do not treat the rest of the statement as a creative writing assignment so much as an expository and persuasive essay about yourself: there should be a moral to your story that makes sense of your application. The format of your personal statement should be two pages, double spaced.

The LSAC forwards your LSAT writing sample to schools. This serves as a check on the quality of your personal statement. Seek out feedback when writing your statement, especially from your pre-law advisor (for content and overall presentation), and from the Writing Center (grammar/mechanics). Expect to go through multiple drafts. Read your statement out loud as you work. Can you picture yourself reading this to someone you really respect?

Note: Sometimes applications include optional short answer portions. In general, always do the optional essays.
Addenda
These are three or four sentence-long explanations of anomalies. They are not apologies or excuses. They are an opportunity to head off an unfavorable impression, but do not grovel or seek forgiveness. The availability of addenda means that you should not use your personal statement to explain academic irregularities or personal failings. Addenda are for:

- Low grades, an “off” semester or gaps in education
- Attendance at multiple institutions
- Low LSAT
- Criminal record:
  - Note: You must disclose any record you have, if and when that information is solicited. It would be a breach of ethics not to. That said, you need not disclose more than what is asked for. Work with your advisor to craft this addendum. See these general guidelines on the impact of criminal history on law school applications.

The Diversity Statement
Long gone are the days of Twelve Angry Men: the legal profession is doing deep soul-searching around the issue of diversity, and is investing heavily in diversifying its pool of practitioners by recruiting from traditionally underrepresented groups. Adding “diversity” to a law school's cohort is a powerful subjective factor on your application, and schools are increasingly giving applicants the chance to discuss their uniqueness. If you have the chance to do a diversity statement, do it! Yale Law School's analysis of its 1L cohort should give you a sense of just how important, and unpredictable, diversity is to law schools.

For guidance on how to approach the diversity statement, see:
1. The LSAC statements on diversity, both racial and LGBT.
2. The ABA statement on diversity.
   - Note: CLEO encompasses financial hardship as well as historical underrepresentation.

Diversity is broadly construed to refer to anyone traditionally underrepresented in the legal profession, and besides helping your application, showing membership in this broad group can earn you money for law school.

1. The LSAC administers a handful of diversity grants.
2. Individual schools have often earmarked funds to subsidize candidates that will increase their diversity.
3. External diversity scholarships include the Earl Warren Scholarship, the ABA Legal Opportunity Scholarship, and those on the list at American University's Washington College of Law.
References

Who?

1. A professor or college instructor, ideally in your major field, and preferably someone who knows you well: rank matters less than institutional affiliation.
2. Another academic reference if at all possible: most law schools want two faculty references. If this is not possible, seek out a thoughtful non-academic reference.
3. [Optional] A work reference or a statement by anyone else who is not a relative or close friend who would add value to your dossier. Law schools want, in the words of the Princeton Review, “credible evidence of competence.”

How?

- Ask far (weeks to months) in advance, and ask explicitly if the person feels they can give you a positive recommendation, and offer them a way out.
- Ask in-person, then follow up by email. Append your resume and personal statement to your request, and include any graded material you produced for the professor.
- Link your recommender to the ABA list of Core Values for guidance on what to write.
- The common wisdom is that anonymous recommendations are more reliable than ones you retain the right to view. If you waive your right to view references, be sure to ask if they will be positive at the time you request them.
- Admissions officers prize illustrative detail and report that specific examples of your character, comparison to other students in the course or in the professor's career, and an assessment of your potential, can catapult an application from maybe to yes.
- Avoid a common mechanical problem: remind your referees not to send recommendations to the Dean's Office or to law schools directly. They will not be considered. All references must be uploaded to the LSDAS Letter of Recommendation service.
- Since letters will become part of your dossier and sent out to any number of schools, they should be general and not tailored to individual programs. NB: CAS will accept multiple letters from a reference, so if you want a tailored letter, request it explicitly.
- Send a thank you note, and let your recommenders know where you get in so they can be proud of you!

Dean's Certification

Some law schools require Dean’s Certification from your undergraduate institution as a condition of matriculation. This form accounts for your academic and disciplinary history. If there are any disciplinary incidents on your record, you must report them honestly. While the Dean’s Certification is not a recommendation, it will also include anecdotal information, such as extenuating circumstances or special involvement on campus.


Interviews
It is rare to be asked to interview, but some schools have begun incorporating an individual or group interview into their process. If you get one, this is your opportunity to clinch it. How? Present yourself as a mature, self-possessed, intelligent person, someone they would want to have as part of their cohort. To this end, go prepared by:

1. Preparing meaningful questions that are specific to the school, not those that are searchable;
2. Looking the part: decorum matters on these occasions.
Once You Are In

You will get answers and offers between January and April. It is a huge window, and you may have to make a decision before you have replies from all your schools. In this section we look at the factors that should influence your decision.

Acceptances: Choosing the Right School
The traditional criteria for a good school are student-to-faculty ratio, the prestige of the faculty and name recognition of the institution, cost and financial aid, alumni network, and job placement rate. Yet in reaction to the contraction of the legal market since 2008, the traditional indicators do not give a sufficient picture of what makes a school worth going to. In order to survive, many schools have cut tuition or accelerated the degree, increased aid, developed clinical programs and externships, founded new centers and created new certificates, employed full-time legal writing faculty, and generally piled on services to make law school worth it. Because there are now many more boutique programs, you may not want to go to one of the traditional prestigious schools over a smaller and potentially more innovative school that may be willing to pay you to go to there. Different schools are worth considering, and if you have multiple offers, worth negotiating.

There is no official ranking entity for law schools. This means that while prestige and reputation matters, there is no objective right answer to which law school is better or worse. Fit with your goals and your subjective perception of the school should matter too. Ultimately, you have to decide whether you want to spend three years at the school, and whether what they offer is worth it to you.

- The ABA does not rank schools, it merely accredits them. There are currently 204 accredited law schools in the US.
- US News ranks law schools, but is not an official accreditor.
- A list of schools GS students have been accepted to.

Beginning in April, the LSAC circulates a list of candidates who have made commitments to schools. Schools will know whether, though not where, you have placed a deposit, and if you change your mind after placing a deposit, you will lose it.

Dual Degrees
Dual and joint degree opportunities, such as J.D./M.B.A., J.D./M.A., J.D./Ph.D., vary widely from school to school: some you must apply for at the time of your initial law school application, others only once you have matriculated. If you are interested in a combined program, discuss it with your pre-law advisor: some may result in a degree subsidy, some in an additional cost; most will add time to your degree, some will not. The wide variety in degrees makes it difficult to generalize about the value of this opportunity, and practicing lawyers disagree about the value of a dual degree relative to the J.D. alone.

Columbia Law School offers a dual degree program called the Accelerated Interdisciplinary Legal Education Program (AILE). It is highly competitive. If you are interested in this opportunity, speak to your advising dean.
Early Action versus Early Decision
Both early action and early decision offer the possibility of getting an admission answer by mid-December. Early decision is binding, early action is not. You will lose your deposit if you break either for a better offer, and you may also lose your eligibility to matriculate in a law school if you break an early admission offer. If finances are a concern, be careful of early decision, in case you are locked into a binding offer with inadequate aid.

National versus Regional and Local Schools
Hopefully at the time you applied, you picked a mix of schools, among which some might be nationally known, and others more prominent regionally or locally. Do not automatically pick the national school. The regional or local school may offer you a better package and, more importantly, may have a stronger local network that will be valuable to you if you know you want to work in a specific place.

Wait Lists
Give them a reason to take you off. If you find yourself wait-listed, admissions officers expect you to submit additional materials, such as an updated transcript or additional letter of recommendation. Write a letter reiterating and elaborating your interest in the school, indicating that you would attend if accepted (if you would), appraising the committee of any of your accomplishments since applying that would strengthen your candidacy, and offering to interview. Going out of your way counts for a lot at this point.

Deferment
Unless you are accepted into a program, such as Teach for America, that has deferment agreements with law schools, requests for deferral are considered on a case-by-case basis. In general requests for deferral of more than one year are not likely to be approved, and admissions officers caution against applying with the intent to defer. With that said, not matriculating in one cohort does not jeopardize your chances should you reapply in a subsequent year.

What If You Do Not Get In?
If you do not get in to law school on your first try, take a cooling-off period and reassess your priorities and interests. If you still want to attend, see your pre-law advisor to discuss a strategy well in advance: it may involve choosing different schools, retaking the LSAT, or overhauling the subjective portions of your application. It may make sense to work or have other experiences before trying again. Most importantly, this is a decision you should make with your loved ones and your pre-law advisor. Many 1Ls have taken time off between undergraduate and law school.

Transfers
If you find yourself in a law school that is, for whatever reason, not a good fit for you, some law schools accept transfer students after 1L. It will be an incredibly tight application process, and if you find yourself applying to transfer, work with your law school advisor closely.

What If You Do Not Want to Be a Lawyer, After All?
Despair not! While the hope is that when you undertake a professional degree, you will, at the end of it, work in that profession, the reality is that the field may change, or you may change, and in three years' time you may not want to be a lawyer after all. Doing your due diligence can minimize the possibility of this outcome,
but in the event that you realize law is not your calling, there are many things a person can do to land on their feet, both within and outside of law. See:

- Santa Clara Law School’s [Non-Lawyer Jobs for Lawyers](#).
- [Leave Law Behind](#) blog.
- Alternative Law Careers on [Legal Careers Out There](#).
Paying for Law School

Law school represents a significant investment of time, effort, and money. Rather than take it on faith that a law degree will pay off, crunch the numbers to determine the specific costs and benefits. Once you have an offer, politely but firmly negotiate: let admissions and financial aid officers know what you require in order to attend without undue hardship. Know, however, that law school is considered an investment in a livelihood, so pick your battles: admissions and financial aid staff will respect the gravity of a competing offer, but not haggling over a few hundred dollars. If your school of choice makes you an inadequate award, communicate politely and explicitly with the Admissions Office and be clear about what you would need to attend.

Have a Grand Plan

- LSAC’s manual, Paying for Law School.
- Law School Transparency maintains a list of non-discounted law school tuition rates.
- The Access Group debt calculator.

Debt and Repayment

Before signing promissory notes, determine your eligibility by checking your credit rating; it will affect your ability to take on private loans and the rates at which your debt is serviced. Prefer public to private debt, when possible: debt to the government tends to be lower in interest and can be suspended in various ways, such as through AmeriCorps or returning to school.

- For Federal Aid, fill out a FAFSA. Work-study is available to law students. And beware of being treated as a dependant. You will have to be very clear with financial aid offices if you are self-supporting, as they may attempt to take into account your parents' income in calculating your award. Also, if you are a Veteran, check with the VA to determine your eligibility for law school funding.

- Scholarships: Many law schools have a pool of funds for merit-based scholarships, and many disburse these on a rolling basis. School policies vary, but as a rule, submit both your application and financial aid paperwork as early in the application cycle as possible to ensure your eligibility for the most funds.

- Loans come in all shapes and sizes. Prefer public debt to private and subsidized to unsubsidized, whenever possible.
  - Federal: Subsidized federal loans (e.g. Subsidized Stafford) accrue no interest while you are in school; unsubsidized loans (e.g. Graduate PLUS and Unsubsidized Stafford Loans) do. Federal loans have the added advantage of often being eligible for capped and income-based repayment plans.
  - Private and institutional: Many private institutions, including law schools, will make loans available to law students. Third party loans tend to carry more interest and stricter terms of repayment, while loans issued directly through your school may have specific benefits.

- Debt Forgiveness Programs: Various forms of loan forgiveness and income-based repayment exist. Some are run directly by law schools for their alumni, others are available to any lawyer working in public service. Equal Justice Works runs webinars outlining the options. Finaid.com surveys the differences between the various repayment and forgiveness programs.
Appendices

Resources On- and Off-Campus

- The Columbia Student Advising Pre-Law Handbook.
- The Center for Career Education will workshop resumes and work on your interview skills.
  - Harvard Law School sample resumes.
- Campus groups: the Columbia Pre-Law Society and Columbia Mock Trial.
- The New York State Bar Association.
- The Florida State University Summer Law Program.

Links

The following links may be helpful to you.

- The Internet Legal Research Group maintains data on salaries, firms and schools, and rankings based on multiple criteria.
- The professional mirror of FindLaw.org aggregates legal news and employment opportunities so you can spot trends in the field.
- Equal Justice Works maintains a list of fellowships that will appeal to you if you are interested in service work but worried about your debt load.
- NALP tracks not just placement rates, but placement fields, so that you can track trends when determining what areas of law to pursue, and which schools place their students well.
- The New York Law Journal is a respected source of legal news and notices.
- The Harvard Law Review showcases cutting edge work in jurisprudence.
- The Order of the Coif is the Honor Society for law students in the top 10 percent of their classes.
- Above the Law is a Gawker-style insider magazine

Quotes from Admissions Officers

Joyce P. Curll, Former Assistant Dean for Admissions and Financial Aid, Harvard Law School:

I look for a well-written statement that conveys coherent thoughts and ideas and that helps me know the applicant better. I hope it will be interesting and that after reading it I will have a better sense of who the person is and what kind of student that person will be when he or she joins the class. The more a statement conveys how a person thinks, what he or she thinks is important, or other such insights, the better. You should think of the statement as an opportunity to round out pieces to the puzzle that make up your application. Write about issues or problems you think about and how you have dealt with them. The more personal you can be — the more you can bring in your own background or history — the more valuable the statement can be.

Peel away the preconceived notions about what you think is expected, then think about what you want to convey to the committee and how that ties in with everything else in your application. Think about leaving the committee with an impression of you. Be comfortable with whatever you write.

In some of the most successful statements, applicants have reflected on who they are, what they’re all about, and why they have done what they have done, and have left the committee with one or two thoughts about them.
Edward Tom, Director of Admissions, UC Berkeley School of Law:

We don’t have a standard form; we leave it pretty open-ended. We do warn applicants that our job is to choose law students, not lawyers, so to that extent we’re interested in their academic potential, not exactly why they want to go to law school or what they want to do with their law degree upon graduation (because people often change their minds). In some cases, applicants have some burning interest or a significant event in their lives that compels them to go to law school for a specific reason, or else they have volunteered or worked actively in some area that interests them very much. And in those cases, of course, they should talk about why they want to get into environmental law or why they want to do public interest. So there are always exceptions, but, in the main, people who don’t have that experience or unique interest ought to be talking about how they are different from everybody else.

Applicants should outline what they want to say in the personal statement and write clear, concise sentences, keeping in mind who their audience is and what our purpose is. I would stay away from trying to be cute. There’s no really good substitute for a cogent sentence. Humor, unless it’s done really well, often falls flat on its face.

Faye Deal, Director of Admissions, Stanford Law School:

There are a variety of things an applicant can write about; it does not have to be about why he or she wants to go to law school. I tell applicants who are in the process of writing that this is their one opportunity to tell the admissions committee why they’re different from every other applicant in the pool, what makes them special and how they can stand out from the 4,000 other applicants we look at every year.

What I want to come away with is something new about the applicant that I haven’t picked up from anywhere else in the file.

If someone is an older applicant who has been out working in a particular field and now is making the jump over to law school, that person should anticipate that one of the questions that’s going to come up when we review the file is “Why is this person changing careers?” so that person may want to focus their personal statement on that. An applicant who was clearly premed the first couple of years of college and then changes to political science may want to tell us why; otherwise, that is an unanswered question we have.

Some applicants mistakenly think that in all cases what we want to know is why they want to go to law school, and that’s not necessarily true.

Keep in mind that part of the exercise is to say what you want to say and to do so in about two pages. Two pages should be enough to get your point across.

Dennis Shields, Former Assistant Dean and Director of Admissions, University of Michigan Law School and Duke Law:

The essay should follow the directions in the application; if it asks for one page or 250 words, the applicant should try to stay within those boundaries. Whoever sits down to read the applicant’s file has probably, if they’re lucky, half an hour to do it. So the candidate needs to make judgments about what’s most important. Also, they ought to be themselves; they ought not to try to sway the reader by their apparent vocabulary and multi-syllable words. They’re much better off being direct and succinct.
Each essay ought to fit the parameters of what a particular school asks for. It is easy for me to pick up a file and know that Yale got the same essay that we did. You don’t want to create a new one for each school from whole cloth but each essay should be a little more different than which law school it mentions by name.


Suggested Reading for Pre-Law Students
The following list of selected books and videos is reprinted with permission from the pre-law readings list published in the Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools.

Law School and Legal Education

The Legal Profession


**Financing Law School**


Biography


Classic and Contemporary Jurisprudence


The *Law Stories* Series of Casebooks by Foundation Press