OUR MISSION
To help every military veteran transitioning to school win admission to the very best graduate or undergraduate institution possible.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE ............................................................................................................. 2
CHAPTER 1: SHOULD YOU GO TO LAW SCHOOL? ..................... 3
CHAPTER 2: APPLICATION BASICS ......................................................... 6
CHAPTER 3: PUTTING YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD ................. 10
CHAPTER 4: LAW SCHOOL ADMISSIONS TEST ......................... 12
CHAPTER 5: TRANSCRIPTS AND THE ASR ................................. 17
CHAPTER 6: THE PERSONAL STATEMENT ................................. 19
CHAPTER 7: ADDENDA AND OPTIONAL ESSAYS .................. 22
CHAPTER 8: YOUR RESUME ................................................................. 23
CHAPTER 9: LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION ....................... 27
APPENDIX A: THE POST-9/11 G.I. BILL ................................. 30
APPENDIX B: FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS ....................... 31
APPENDIX C: EVALUATING EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS .......... 32
CONCLUSION .............................................................................................. 34
PREFACE

For most of us, serving in the Armed Forces has been a high point of our lives—the camaraderie, leadership, and teamwork fundamental to life in uniform set a high bar for any future career. The first challenge you will face as you begin your transition from military to civilian life is finding a career path that will sustain the sense of purpose and direction that likely drove your decision to serve.

Law school is just one of many good options available to you. You could start a business, enter the workforce, or pursue a different graduate degree. A common alternative to law school for military veterans is a Masters in Business Administration (MBA). If this is also of interest to you, check out the Service to School MBA Application Guide.

As a result of the operational tempo of the last decade, veterans today possess a level of leadership skill, maturity, and experience that law schools—and the legal profession as a whole—seek. In fact, most law schools now actively recruit veterans. While not without risk, going to law school can be a great way of easing the transition, opening doors to a variety of public and private sector careers and a wide range of service opportunities.

This guide will help you not only to understand the process of applying to law school, but also to evaluate whether the investment of time and money makes sense in the context of your professional goals. We hope you find it to be useful and comprehensive, and we invite feedback that will help us make future editions even better.

- THE S2S TEAM
CHAPTER 1: SHOULD YOU GO TO LAW SCHOOL?

Let’s face it: choosing to attend law school is a big life decision. The Juris Doctor (JD) degree is expensive, time consuming, and rigorous, but paired with your military background it can be a powerful tool in today’s world. The JD is a professional degree and prepares you for a specific occupation, but within the legal field you will have the flexibility to move from one job to another, and from one sector to the other. Lawyers who have equipped themselves with the right training and credentials, and built a robust professional network, can access an incredibly wide range of public and private sector opportunities. In the public sector, you can work as a public defender, prosecutor, judge, Foreign Service Officer, CIA analyst, human rights advocate, DoD lawyer, congressional staffer, etc. On the private side, you can represent clients in any number of transactional or litigation specialties or serve as in-house counsel for businesses, financial firms, start-ups, charitable foundations, sports teams, and countless other entities.

But law school can also be an expensive and time-consuming detour for those who have not fully considered the nature of the profession or the range of employment outcomes. Even after completing most of your law school curriculum, it can be hard to gauge if you will enjoy the legal world until you start practicing, so you should do what you can now to talk to lawyers, research practice areas, and figure out what it is you want to do with the degree. Find people who practice the kind of law you think you’re interested in, and figure out how they got from A to B to C in their careers.

Later in this introduction we will address some of the reasons NOT to go to law school. Our goal is not to dissuade you from attending law school; rather it is to help you make a decision that you will not come to regret several years and $100,000+ too late.

WHAT IS LAW SCHOOL?

We don’t mean to insult your intelligence. Everyone knows what law school is at a basic level: a place where you study the law. In the United States, law schools are institutions that provide a professional education in the law. Programs are typically three years in length and issue a JD degree, a professional doctorate, upon graduation. Many people who have gone through law school say that it provides a skill-set (thinking and reading critically, writing and speaking clearly and persuasively, etc.) that is valuable no matter what profession you ultimately choose. Others, however, say that you should only go to law school if you want to be a lawyer. Regardless, before you make the significant investment of time and money, it is important that you have a clear idea of what you hope to get out of your legal education.

The vast majority of law schools are “brick and mortar” institutions that are part of larger universities. Every year, US News and World Report ranks law schools (see the rankings here), though there is wide disagreement over the value and scoring rubrics of the rankings. In 2016, there were 204 schools ranked – schools listed 1 through 150 are ranked in order, while the rest (bottom 25 percent) are simply listed in alphabetical order as a “Rank Not Published” group. The ranks are broken into a Tier System – schools ranked 1-50 are Tier 1; schools 51-100 are Tier 2; and so on. We’ll cover some more rankings in Chapter 2, but the US News rankings are a good starting point to get a general sense of where different law schools fit into the prestige universe and the scope of the opportunities provided by their respective degrees.

Generally speaking, the “Top 14” (or T14) are considered truly national law schools (the distinction of “Top 14” is an informal label attached to the group of schools that generally tops the annual US News rankings). In most cases, a degree from one of these schools will make you a competitive candidate for good legal jobs in any part of the country and in a variety of law-related career paths. For the T14, the geographic location of your law school does not limit where you can expect to be hired, and large law firms from around the nation hire a large percentage of their new lawyers through on-campus interviews conducted at these schools. Outside the T14, law schools become increasingly regional and you should expect the location of the law school to determine where your JD has the most currency on the job market.

Several law schools offer part-time degree programs, which are a great option for someone looking to obtain a JD while continuing a day job. For a listing of part-time programs, see here.

Law school students are often classified as 1Ls, 2Ls, and 3Ls, designations which correspond to their 1st, 2nd and 3rd years of study, respectively. Though there is no standard curriculum for all law schools, most have students take courses in the following subjects: Civil Procedure, Constitutional Law, Contracts,
Criminal Law, Property, Torts, and Legal Writing. These courses are meant to provide an overview of legal studies and are usually taken in the 1L year as a set curriculum. Law students are generally able to select their courses during 2L and 3L years, which allows them to study different fields of the law, such as corporate, international, advanced litigation, or tax law.

In order to teach the law, most law school professors use the "Socratic method," the goal of which is to train students in the legal reasoning necessary to properly interpret theories, statutes, and precedents. The method involves the professor calling on a student at random and asking him about the argument made in a specific legal case, then following up with a series of questions to challenge the student's argument and assumptions. The professors pull the questions and debates from select court cases, which are compiled into "casebooks" for each course. This format allows students to learn by listening to and participating in in-depth exchanges with the professor, rather than by just receiving one-way lectures day in and day out. While some professors do still lecture, the majority of classes are taught using casebooks and the Socratic method. Regardless, the amount of reading you’ll do in law school will dwarf whatever reading you do before or after law school.

In addition to academic courses, many law schools offer "legal clinics" as part of their curriculum, which give students practical experience with the law while generally providing pro bono (free) representation to non-profit groups or underserved populations (low-income defendants and juveniles, immigrants and refugees, death row inmates, etc.). The other major opportunity for students to obtain legal experience is through summer internships. You’ll have opportunities to pursue those after your first year and again after your second year in law school.

Finally, some schools in recent years have begun offering accelerated JD programs, which are either stand-alone JDs or part of joint degree programs with another type of degree, such as an MBA. These typically have fixed programs of study and may include summer courses in order to squeeze in all graduation requirements on the accelerated or joint timeline.

After graduation from law school, there is another hurdle new lawyers must overcome before they can begin to practice law in their chosen state: the bar exam. The bar exam is a test that is used to determine whether a candidate is sufficiently qualified to practice law in a specific jurisdiction; if you intend to (or at least want to be able to) practice law in multiple jurisdictions during your career, you will need to take multiple bar exams. In all states but California, to qualify to take the bar exam you must have graduated from a law school accredited by the American Bar Association (ABA). But ABA accreditation, while conferring legitimacy on law schools, does not necessarily signal effectiveness— many pump out graduates every year who can’t pass the bar exam and can’t find jobs.

We intentionally omitted online law degree programs from the discussion above and strongly recommend against pursuing a degree online. There is currently only one ABA-accredited hybrid (part in-person, part online) program in the country, and no accredited fully-online programs. In short, they are a waste of time, money, and effort, and will get you nowhere in the legal field.

WHY YOU SHOULD NOT GO TO LAW SCHOOL

The argument against going to law school comes down to two things: cost and employment prospects. Over the past three decades, the cost of going to law school has soared. Since 1985, inflation has been a factor in rising law school prices, but legal education inflation far exceeds the inflation rate. In 1985, the average private school tuition was $7,526 (1985 dollars), which would now cost a student $16,294 (2013 dollars). Instead, the average tuition is $41,985 (2013 dollars). In other words, private law school is now 2.6 times as expensive as it was in 1985 after adjusting for inflation. Public school (for residents) is now about 5.5 times as expensive. Why has it gone up so much? There are many competing answers to this question, but simply speaking, a proliferation of lending options and student willingness to assume educational debt have facilitated major increases in law school tuition independent of change in the actual value of the degree.

A rule-of-thumb recommended by financial advisors is that students should not borrow more than 1.5 times the annual salary they anticipate making in their first job after graduation, but adhering to this rule is increasingly difficult for law school students. The average educational debt for law school students is nearly $150,000 and rising (see here for a breakdown of average debt by school), which would not be an issue if most graduates entered high-paying jobs. But starting salaries for new lawyers vary tremendously. The mean, or average salary, for Class of 2014 graduates in long-term, full-time
employment was about $82,300. For jobs in private practice, the average was well over $102,000. However, in small firms, which account for over half of the jobs taken in law firms, salaries of $50,000-70,000 were typical. Likewise, public service jobs—those in government, public interest organizations, and as judicial clerks—continued to offer relatively low starting salaries, with means of $54,820, $47,030, and $53,150, respectively.

Although salaries of more than $75,000 accounted for almost 37% of salaries reported, there were a nearly equal number of salaries of $55,000 or less. Outside of private practice, most salaries were $75,000 or less. The prevalence of high salaries in large firms, along with the relatively stable salaries among other employers, continues to result in a salary distribution with two peaks, as shown in the salary distribution curve: one in the $40,000 to $65,000 range and one at $160,000.

Because this data does not take into account salaries not reported, but does account for nearly all graduates working at large firms, both the median and mean salary for jobs as a whole, and in firms specifically, are biased upward. Although it is not possible to impute a salary figure to every full-time job for which a salary was not reported, it is possible to make a reasonable estimate of what an adjusted mean would be, using a procedure that takes into account the distribution of full-time jobs. For the Class of 2014, doing so results in an adjusted mean salary of about $77,000 compared with about $82,300 based on reported salaries alone. And these statistics only account for the 70% of graduates who find long-term, full-time employment. Nearly 10% find only short-term or part-time employment, and another 10% remain unemployed-but-seeking a year after graduation.

Don’t be fooled by the marketing pitches you’ll get from law schools. If you’re wondering who makes up that tall, skinny bump on the higher end of that salary curve, they tend to be the graduates of T14 schools working at so-called “BigLaw” firms (which mostly hire out of the T14). People not in this category generally earn much closer to—if not below—the mean. And for the nearly half of all graduates who fall in the $40,000 to $65,000 salary range, the debt load can turn out to be two to three times their starting salary, making the challenge of servicing loans quite daunting. With a 7% interest rate, a low-earning graduate’s debt can quickly outgrow his or her ability to pay it down.

If you have access to the G.I. Bill or other educational funding, this may be less of an issue for you, but nevertheless it is something to seriously consider as you decide whether or not to attend law school, and if so, where.

Together, the numbers point to what ought to be a sobering conclusion—that a large number of graduates emerge from law school worse off than before. That in a nutshell is the primary argument against going to
law school. On top of that, job satisfaction among lawyers is notoriously low. Practicing law can be very stressful for a variety of reasons and you may face long and unpredictable hours, a hyper-competitive work environment, missed family events and holidays, and mind-numbing amounts of tedious paperwork. So now, with your eyes fully open to the risks and drawbacks, do you still want to be a lawyer?

MAKING AN INFORMED DECISION

The best way forward begins with a careful weighing of the pros and cons of going to law school- consider the debt you may incur, the employment statistics for the schools you are considering, and the possibility that you might not enjoy being a lawyer. This mental accounting will be different for everyone. For example, if you have 100% Post-9/11 G.I. Bill eligibility or other funding that can minimize the debt you would incur by attending law school (see Appendix A), many of the arguments outlined in the previous section do not apply to you. Or maybe you have existing family or professional connections that reduce your uncertainty regarding employment after graduation. You should also consider that military veterans often enjoy an advantage in hiring processes, as employers are eager to bring in individuals with demonstrated leadership ability and teamwork skills. But this does not mean that you can ignore the facts above and expect to sail into a six-figure job or competitive clerkship. Make a realistic assessment of your financial situation and career prospects and adjust your decision-making calculus accordingly.

We cannot stress enough how critical it is that you take the time to think deeply about this decision before jumping head-first into the application process. For more information, see APPENDIX A: The Post 9/11-G.I. Bill, APPENDIX B: Financial Considerations, and APPENDIX C: Evaluating a Law School’s Employment Prospects.

Enough with the disclaimers– let’s look at the roadmap to help you gain admission to best law school possible.
CHAPTER 2: APPLICATION BASICS

Now that you have committed to applying, the good news is that the law school application process is one of the simpler ones out there. Everything is run by a single organization—the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC). LSAC serves as an aggregator for your application materials and then sends everything to the schools when you are ready.

But simpler doesn’t necessarily mean easier—applying to law school will certainly require a great deal of effort on your part. You will still have to spend massive amounts of time and energy studying for the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), writing personal statements, creating your resume, filling out the application forms, and obtaining letters of recommendation. But LSAC does make your life easier when it comes to compiling and submitting your application materials.

The first thing you should do is set up an account on LSAC and register as a “Future JD Student.” This will be your portal for the entire law school admissions process. Once you have registered, you can browse the site to become familiar with the application process, gather information about law schools, and download LSAT practice materials. You will also receive your LSAC account number, which is your primary identifier for all LSAC services. You should then pay the $175 fee for LSAC’s Credential Assembly Service (CAS), which compiles your academic transcripts, LSAT score, and letters of recommendation. Most schools require that you use CAS, and doing so allows you to submit all documentation only once regardless of how many schools you apply to.

There are six major components of the law school application: the LSAT, an Academic Summary Report (GPA/Transcript information generated by LSAC), a personal statement, optional essays or addenda, a resume, and letters of recommendation. In addition to these six components, some schools will add other requirements such as a Dean’s Letter stating that you are/were a student in good standing or an additional essay on a specific topic. We will now give an overview of the six components, addressed in roughly the order in which you should complete them. In subsequent chapters, we will go more in-depth and discuss strategies for completing each section of the application.

LSAT

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is the standardized test required for admission to all law schools and is meant to provide a standard measure of an applicant’s reading, critical thinking, and reasoning skills. The test is completed using pencil and paper/scantron and consists of five 35-minute multiple choice sections, broken into three types—reading comprehension, logical reasoning, and analytical reasoning. You will have four scored sections—one reading comprehension, one analytical reasoning, and two logical reasoning—as well as one un-scored experimental section that is used to test new questions for future exams (you won’t know which section is the experimental one when you take the test). There is also a 35-minute writing section, which, while un-scored, is sent to the schools to which you are applying as a writing sample. The test is scored on a 120-180 point scale and based on a curve, with an average score in the 150s.

The test is administered by LSAC four times a year— in June, October, December, and February— at designated testing centers across the country and worldwide. You should plan to take the LSAT no later than October of the year in which you plan to submit your applications (June, if feasible, is even better). This allows you to apply early in the cycle and leaves the December date as a back-up option if you want to retake the test to try to improve your score. LSAT scores are good for up to five years, so if you know that you are a couple of years out from applying, it may be a good strategy to take the LSAT well before your intended application date and just hang onto your score until you’re ready to apply.

We strongly recommend you start studying for the LSAT at least six months before you plan on submitting your applications. Studying for the LSAT can be very time-intensive— a good study plan can take up 2–3 hours a night and 8–10 hours over the weekend for some people. We also recommend taking a good prep course either in person or online, as your location and schedule allow. Your S2S ambassador can give you information about free or discounted test prep options.

One note of caution— you can’t take the LSAT more than three times in any two-year period, so make sure you are properly prepared before you register to take the test. Don’t waste one of your chances (as well as your time and money) taking the test before you’re ready.
ACADEMIC SUMMARY REPORT

One of the first things you should do is have an official transcript from each undergraduate and graduate institution you attended sent to LSAC through the Credential Assembly Service. LSAC provides detailed guidance on how to submit your transcripts [here](#). Once it has received your transcripts, LSAC will generate an Academic Summary Report (ASR) that shows trends in your academic performance over time and gives context to your numbers.

Law schools know that not all undergraduate GPAs are created equal. A student with a 3.3 GPA in Astrophysics from MIT or one of the service academies is probably a better law school candidate than a student with a 3.7 GPA in Leisure Studies from a less rigorous school with rampant grade inflation. Since LSAC has collected undergraduate GPAs and LSAT scores from nearly all applicants since 1976, it can compare your numbers to those of previous applicants who attended your institution and provide a better picture of your relative merit.

In addition to your grades from your primary undergraduate institution, LSAC will also factor in any summer school or study abroad courses taken for credit, and any transfer credits you received from other undergraduate-level institutions. As a result, your LSAC-calculated GPA may turn out to be different than the GPA calculated by your primary undergraduate institution. All you have to do is submit the correct transcripts; LSAC will crunch all the numbers for you.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Generally speaking, the personal statement is an open-ended essay that can be written on any subject of your choosing—its purpose is to give admissions officers a window into who you are beyond your LSAT score, transcript, and resume. Though some schools will give specific requirements for the essay, such as a word limit or theme, many schools leave it open to your judgment. For instance, a law school's personal statement prompt might sound something like:

“The Personal Statement provides an opportunity for you to present yourself, your background, your ideas, and your qualifications to the Admissions Committee. Please limit your statement to two pages using a minimum of 11-point, 1-inch margins, and double spacing.”

With thousands of applications to sift through, admissions officers will look to the personal statement to help differentiate you from the crowd. A great personal statement will tell a good story, highlight important personal attributes and/or experiences, and provide color and context to the rest of your application. As a veteran, you have a real opportunity with the personal statement to set yourself apart from many other applicants and show how you will bring something unique to the law school community.

The truth is that the factors given the most weight in law school admissions decisions are your undergraduate GPA and LSAT score. However, there is a common adage that “while your GPA and LSAT will open the door, your personal statement will allow you to walk through it.” Conversely, a poorly constructed personal statement and/or careless errors elsewhere in the application can derail even the most qualified applicants.

It is very important to start the personal statement early in the process so that you have plenty of time to develop ideas, produce drafts, get feedback from trusted mentors/friends/colleagues, and revise until the essay is perfect. Good topic selection and lots of revision are the keys to perfecting your personal statement. We will discuss the personal statement in more depth in Chapter 6.

ADDENDA AND OPTIONAL ESSAYS

As the last part of your application, schools will allow you to submit addenda or optional essays. Traditionally, these are offered as an opportunity to explain certain negative aspects of your profile (a large gap between multiple LSAT scores, a bad semester or bad grade in a class) or to bolster your application with additional important information. Many schools offer an optional “diversity statement” essay in which you can describe aspects of your background that would enhance the diversity of your law
school community. You should write these if there is something clearly necessary or beneficial to explain. Otherwise, you may raise more questions than you settle.

Let’s start with addenda. Some are required if you have certain things in your background. Specifically, you will be asked if you have ever committed a misdemeanor or a felony, been charged with academic dishonesty or plagiarism, been arrested or convicted, received speeding tickets, placed on probation or suspension, etc. These issues are lumped together in a section called Moral Character and Fitness issues. It is much better to be honest, forthright and clear about any possible negative issues. If you do not come forth with any issue and it is discovered later, you will most likely be expelled or have your acceptance revoked. And even if the law school doesn’t catch it, the bar membership committee might, and then you might not be permitted to join the bar if you failed to disclose something in your applications. Treat those as required addenda.

An addendum can also be used to explain multiple LSAT scores, low undergraduate GPAs, and reasons for choosing certain references for your recommendation letters. Because these kinds of addenda are not required, you should exercise judgment in deciding whether or not to submit them. Many “blemishes” in a profile don’t merit an explanation, they just are what they are, and you can let the rest of your positive profile speak for itself. Your S2S ambassador can help you decide whether you should submit an optional addendum.

When it comes to diversity statements and optional essays, our advice is that you should submit one only if the topic reasonably applies to you and you have something interesting to say that’s not already obvious from the rest your application. A well-constructed diversity statement about your personal background or military experience can be a tremendous asset to your application, but on the flip-side you don’t want to make extra work for an admissions officer by including extra, unnecessary information. We recommend discussing with your S2S ambassador whether or not one of these optional essays or statements would be appropriate.

RESUME

Many law school applications require that you submit a resume. Even for schools where it’s optional, you should still submit one. You should spend as much time as is necessary to craft a comprehensive and easy-to-read resume, as it is your chance to show schools a compelling snapshot of you on a single page. The resume is where you present the most important aspects of your record, such as the leadership impact you have had or the intercultural experiences you have gained in the military. We will go into resumes in much greater detail in a later chapter, but we’ll leave you here with three main rules of resume writing:

- **Use action words to describe your impact.**
- **Quantify your accomplishments to the extent you can.**
- **Always use the third person and past tense (unless the job is still ongoing, in which case you can use the present tense).**

We recommend you start working on your resume as soon as you begin considering leaving the military and no later than six months out from your application deadline. This gives you the opportunity to fix any holes you might have in your career or extracurricular sections, get feedback from advisors (like your S2S ambassador) on content and presentation, and make it perfect.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Every law school will require that you submit at least one letter of recommendation, and most schools require two. The entire recommendation letter process is run through LSAC, which compiles all of your letters and then allows you to pick and choose which letters you want to send to each school. You simply fill in your recommenders’ information and then LSAC will email them directly with guidance on submitting their letters.

(LSAC used to offer an “evaluation” option as an alternative to letters, but that has been discontinued as of March 2016.)
LSAC also lets you choose between general letters and targeted letters. A general letter is a recommendation that can be sent to multiple schools, while a targeted letter is tailored and addressed to a specific school. For the most part, schools expect to receive general letters, so you won’t be at a disadvantage for using them. However, if you have a first choice school or a recommender who has a special connection to a particular school, a targeted letter could be helpful to your application.

Choosing recommenders can be easy or difficult depending on your unique personal and professional experience. For the typical applicant, law schools prefer that letters come from academic references: professors that have taught you in class, faculty advisors, etc. However, since you have been out of school for a significant amount of time, it is acceptable (and encouraged) to include a recommendation from a military supervisor. The ideal combination would be one academic letter and one professional letter. That said, if you are struggling to find an academic reference, most schools will accept two professional recommendations. What really matters is your recommenders’ enthusiasm for your candidacy and how well they know your work. Having a strong, personalized letter of recommendation matters much more than your recommenders’ title or professional prestige. We will go in depth into picking recommenders and getting them to write great recommendations in Chapter 9.

THE APPLICATION TIMELINE: ROLLING ADMISSIONS

Most law schools use a “Rolling Admissions” system for the application process. This means that schools will begin accepting applications around early September and will continue to review applications and admit students until the class is full. Most schools have application deadlines in February and make their initial notifications (accepted, waitlisted, denied) by April, but be sure to verify the particular deadlines/cycles of the schools to which you are applying.

There isn’t a clear consensus on how much advantage you gain by applying early in a cycle, and some schools (at least publicly) say that you stand an equal chance of admission regardless of when in the cycle you apply. Nevertheless, we recommend applying early as competition may not be as stiff and admissions officers may not be as stingy with offers. This comes with the big caveat that is better to submit a perfect application in December/January than to submit a mediocre application in September. Although you should absolutely shoot for an early submission, it is worth taking a few extra weeks if it would result in a significantly improved application.

So this brings us to the application timeline. As we recommended earlier, you should begin preparing your application at least six months out from when you want to submit it. You will need all of this time to write your essays, create your resume, and (most importantly) study for the LSAT.

You should try to take the LSAT in June before the application cycle so that you can submit your application in September. If taking the June exam isn’t an option, another strategy for submitting an early application is to prepare the rest of your application ahead of the October LSAT, so that your package is complete as soon as you receive your LSAT score. And as we said above, you should build into your timeline enough room to retake the LSAT if necessary. Below is a sample timeline for planning your applications.

**January**: Create LSAC account, register for credential assembly service and request transcripts
**February**: Begin studying for LSAT, sign up for LSAT prep course
**February-May**: Register for June LSAT (if feasible), request letters of recommendations, complete first draft of personal statement, resume, and addenda/optional essays
**June**: Take LSAT, decide which schools to apply to, get feedback on application materials
**July-August**: Revise application materials, register to take Oct LSAT (either first time or re-take), follow up on letters of recommendation
**September**: Finalize application essays and resume, begin submitting applications
**October**: Take LSAT if necessary, prepare for interviews
**November-April**: Receive decision notifications, apply for financial aid

SELECTING SCHOOLS
To begin your school search, start with what matters most to you: reputation, location, Yellow Ribbon options (see appendix A), concentrations, clinics, etc. When deciding how many and which schools to apply to, keep in mind how competitive the schools are and be realistic about your chances of admissions. We recommend considering roughly 5-10 schools, with a mix of reach, match, and safety schools. Just know ahead of time that applying to schools can be expensive, with each application costing between $60 and $100 (though some schools offer application fee waivers for veterans).

Only you know what matters most to you for your legal education. You might decide, for example, that it’s worth it to you to invest in law school only if you get into specific schools that are long shots. That’s fine. Or you might decide that you are definitely going to law school, so you’ll want to round out your list with some safer options. Bear in mind that for roughly the top 14 schools, location does not significantly impact your future job prospects. Once you’re outside the T14, pick by location first (where you plan to settle and at least start your legal career, even if you eventually end up somewhere else), then look at ranking/reputation within that geographic area.

How do you determine if a school is a reach, match, or safety school? Admissions offices wouldn’t have you write personal statements and submit recommendation letters if it were only about the numbers, but the numbers matter a lot more than anything else, no matter what the law schools’ marketing pitches say. So the best way to figure out your chances are to match your GPA and LSAT scores against the median scores at the schools you are looking at. Those are often published on the schools’ websites. You can also use the GPA and LSAT calculator on the LSAC website to calculate your odds (that should really be your first stop). If you don't have a score yet, you can use hypothetical scores and see how they move your odds accordingly.

This should give you a good sense of your chances at the schools you are interested in. Will you get an admissions boost for being a veteran? Probably yes. But you still have to be at least in the running for a particular school.
CHAPTER 3: PUTTING YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD

KNOW YOUR COMPETITION

Competitive applicants to the top law schools are all smart and accomplished in their own ways, but many are still undergraduates or have been out of school for only a couple of years. Few will possess the leadership experience you have. As a non-traditional applicant, you have an advantage as law schools seek out a diverse student body possessing a wide range of backgrounds.

But in order for your record to give you a leg up, you need to show how your particular experiences and perspective relate to your future study of the law and make you an asset to the legal community. A commendable service record alone won’t get you admitted to a top school—through your application you need to convince admissions committees that your record of service translates into you becoming an exemplary student.

STANDING OUT FROM YOUR PEERS

It is not enough to simply have been a good Soldier, Sailor, Airman, Coastguard or Marine. Particularly if you aspire to attend a T14 school, you will have to show that you were among the best of your military peers. So how can you prove that you were a top performer? Your two best tools for this will be your resume and your letters of recommendation.

On your resume, you can make yourself stand out by noting any special jobs, accelerated promotions, fitness report rankings, awards, etc. For instance, if you were ranked #1 out of 10 peers by your commanding officer, this would be a valuable thing to put front and center on your resume. If you were promoted to a position earlier than is typical for that job, this too should be noted. Even if you were not ranked highly or promoted quickly, there are other ways to stand out. Did you publish articles in professional service journals, or attend special training courses, or take on challenging collateral duties? You can also list the awards you received (schools typically do not know what each award means or how difficult they are to get, so you may want to explain noteworthy ones—i.e. combat awards).

In Chapter 9, we will go much further in depth on how to get a glowing recommendation letter. But for now, you need to understand that what matters most is the enthusiasm and praise the recommender has for you. If you are choosing between several people, choose the person that is most likely to say you were his/her best subordinate. This is infinitely more important than the qualifications of the person—a glowing recommendation from a Captain is better than a lukewarm recommendation from a Lieutenant Colonel.

STEREOTYPES OF MILITARY APPLICANTS

Whether fair or not, military applicants are sometimes stereotyped, which can work both for and against you. By virtue of your background, admissions committee members will assume that you have extensive leadership and teamwork training, and that you know how to make tough decisions in trying circumstances. This is a strong reason why law school programs have such an affinity for military applicants, and your task in crafting your application is to confirm and build upon these positive stereotypes.

On the other hand, military applicants are sometimes assumed to also have certain weaknesses: an inability to operate without clear guidance or a chain of command; poor communication ability, both written and oral; and a lack of creativity and intellectual curiosity. You should be mindful of these stereotypes, as they will be part of an admissions officer’s initial impression of you. But this does not mean you need to devote an entire essay to why you actually do have a lot of creativity. Instead, consider how you can more subtly rebut these stereotypes by highlighting certain aspects of your life, personality, and skill-set in your resume, personal statement, and letters of recommendation.

YOUR “NARRATIVE”
Law schools want you to engage in self-reflection about your life and work experience. What matters most to you both in your personal life and career, and how are your past, present, and future connected? Is there a common theme or motivation behind your decision to serve and your decision to attend law school? You’ll want to demonstrate that you’ve also given plenty of thought to what comes after law school, and that you’re not just aimlessly wandering into your post-military life.

As a military veteran, you already stand out from civilian candidates in the admissions process and benefit from the positive stereotypes mentioned above. But you are also competing for admission against other veterans, who may possess experiences very similar to yours. So you need to think about what makes you an individual and develop an engaging personal voice. This brings us to your application “narrative.” While law school applications may seem lengthy when you are writing them, the fact is that you do not have that much space to convince a school that they should want you as a student and future alumnus. To set yourself up for success, you should develop a “narrative” theme or self-marketing handle that encapsulates your greatest strengths and most meaningful experiences in 1-2 sentences and will stand out in the minds of the admissions officers. This exercise will help you focus your application and allow you to present a coherent and compelling picture of yourself as a candidate.

An example of a good summary theme could be the following: “I am an Army Infantry Officer who writes poetry in his free time and volunteers at the Wounded Warrior Games. I want to use my military experience to work within the international law field to update the Law of Armed Conflict for the 21st century.”

Why does this theme work? As an Army Infantry Officer, the candidate obviously possesses strong leadership and management ability. But the poetry hobby and volunteer work add depth to his profile. And he draws a clear connection between his past military service and his desire to attend law school and work on Law of Armed Conflict issues.

The time and energy spent developing your narrative is crucial. This should drive how you approach each component in your application, from developing your personal statement topic, to selecting your recommenders, to choosing what to highlight in your resume. It will also help you when it comes time for interviews later in the process. Ultimately, your goal is to provide the admissions committee with a clear sense of who you are, what drives you, and what your vision for your life is.
CHAPTER 4: THE LAW SCHOOL ADMISSIONS TEST

INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the LSAT is a standardized test that is administered by the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) and required for admission by all law schools. The test is meant to "measure skills that are considered essential for success in law school: the reading and comprehension of complex texts with accuracy and insight; the organization and management of information and the ability to draw reasonable inferences from it; the ability to think critically; and the analysis and evaluation of the reasoning and arguments of others.

The LSAT is scored on a curve from 120 to 180 points. A score of 180 will put you in the 99.9th percentile, while a score of 170 will put you in the 99th percentile. This means that only 1% of test takers will score above 170. The average score on the test is around 150, but this varies by test sitting. The upside of a "curved exam" is that it universalizes difficulty- if you found a question difficult, it is likely that others also found it difficult. The same is true for the test as a whole.

To attend a T14 law school, you'll want an LSAT score above 160 (at or above 170 for the top five schools). This already factors in the advantage you have as a veteran applicant; most people need to score above a 165 for a T14. Even if you are looking primarily at less elite schools, for which the median LSAT scores are lower, you should still try to get the best score you can. A higher score can open up opportunities you might not have considered before and/or make you more competitive for merit-based scholarships.

It is important to understand that the LSAT is NOT an intelligence test. Doing well requires both natural aptitude and technique, and the more you study, and the smarter you study, the better you will do. The necessary skills will come naturally to a small group of people, but the vast majority of applicants will need to dedicate a significant amount of time to learning and practicing the skills. This means that you must give yourself plenty of time to study-- we recommend at least six months-- in order to do as well as possible. We'll discuss strategies for preparing later on in the chapter.

Once you achieve consistency in your practice tests and feel prepared, you can go to the LSAC website and register for an upcoming test.

PARTS OF THE TEST

The LSAT is completed using pencil and paper/scantron and consists of five 35-minute multiple choice sections, broken into three types-- reading comprehension, logical reasoning, and analytical reasoning. You will have four scored sections-- one reading comprehension, one analytical reasoning, and two logical reasoning-- as well as one un-scored experimental section that is used to test new questions for future exams (you won't know which section is the experimental one when you take the test). There is also a 35-minute writing section, which, while un-scored, is sent to the schools to which you are applying as a writing sample.

READING COMPREHENSION

The Reading Comprehension section of the test measures your ability to read and analyze complex material. The section contains four sets of reading questions, each with an associated passage or passages. The passages can be about any number of subjects, ranging from humanities and social sciences to biology and physics. The subjects do not have to be related to the law and there is no requirement for any prior knowledge of the subject matter (nor would it help). According to LSAC, the "selections are densely written, use high-level vocabulary, and contain sophisticated argument or complex rhetorical structure." You can find more information about the Reading Comprehension section as well as sample questions at the LSAC website here.
The painter Roy Lichtenstein helped to define pop art — the movement that incorporated commonplace objects and commercial-art techniques into paintings — by paraphrasing the style of comic books in his work. His merger of a popular genre with the forms and intentions of fine art generated a complex result: while poking fun at the pretensions of the art world, Lichtenstein's work also managed to convey a seriousness of theme that enabled it to transcend mere parody.

That Lichtenstein's images were fine art was at first difficult to see, because, with their word balloons and highly stylized figures, they looked like nothing more than the comic book panels from which they were copied. Standard art history holds that pop art emerged as an impersonal alternative to the histrionics of abstract expressionism, a movement in which painters conveyed their private attitudes and emotions using nonrepresentational techniques. The truth is that by the time pop art first appeared in the early 1960s, abstract expressionism had already lost much of its force. Pop art painters weren't quarreling with the powerful early abstract expressionist work of the late 1940s but with a second generation of abstract expressionists whose work seemed airy, high-minded, and overly lyrical. Pop art paintings were full of simple black lines and large areas of primary color. Lichtenstein's work was part of a general rebellion against the fading emotional power of abstract expressionism, rather than an aloof attempt to ignore it.

But if rebellion against previous art by means of the careful imitation of a popular genre were all that characterized Lichtenstein's work, it would possess only the reflective power that parodies have in relation to their subjects. Beneath its cartoonish methods, his work displayed an impulse toward realism, an urge to say that what was missing from contemporary painting was the depiction of contemporary life. The stilted romances and war stories portrayed in the comic books on which he based his canvases, the stylized automobiles, hot dogs, and table lamps that appeared in his pictures, were reflections of the culture Lichtenstein inhabited. But, in contrast to some pop art, Lichtenstein's work exuded not a jaded cynicism about consumer culture, but a kind of deliberate naivete, intended as a response to the excess of sophistication he observed not only in the later abstract expressionists but in some other pop artists. With the comics — typically the domain of youth and innocence — as his reference point, a nostalgia fills his paintings that gives them, for all their surface bravado, an inner sweetness. His persistent use of comic-art conventions demonstrates a faith in reconciliation, not only between cartoons and fine art, but between parody and true feeling.

Which one of the following best captures the author's attitude toward Lichtenstein's work?

(a) Enthusiasm for its more rebellious aspects  
(b) Respect for its successful parody of youth and innocence  
(c) Pleasure in its blatant rejection of abstract expressionism  
(d) Admiration for its subtle critique of contemporary culture  
(e) Appreciation for its ability to incorporate both realism and naivete

**Answer and Explanation**

This question requires the test taker to understand the attitude the author of the passage displays toward Lichtenstein's work.
The correct response is (E). Response (E) most accurately and completely captures the author’s attitude. First, the author’s appreciation for Lichtenstein’s art is indicated by way of contrast with the way in which the author describes what Lichtenstein’s art is not. For example, the author asserts that Lichtenstein’s work “transcended mere parody,” and that unlike other pop art, it did not display a “jaded cynicism.” Similarly, the author holds that there is more to Lichtenstein’s work than “the reflective power that parodies possess in relation to their subjects.” Moreover, the author’s appreciation is reflected in several positive statements regarding Lichtenstein’s work. The author’s appreciation for Lichtenstein’s realism is indicated by the author’s statement that “Beneath its cartoonish methods, his work displayed an impulse toward realism, an urge to say that what was missing from contemporary painting was the depiction of contemporary life.” That the author also appreciates Lichtenstein’s naivete is demonstrated in this sentence: “Lichtenstein’s work exuded not a jaded cynicism about consumer culture, but a kind of deliberate naivete ..” This idea is further expanded in the next sentence, which says that “for all their surface bravado,” Lichtenstein’s paintings possess “an inner sweetness.” It is important to note that these evaluations appear in the last paragraph and form part of the author’s conclusion about the importance of Lichtenstein’s art.
Logical Reasoning

Logical Reasoning questions test your ability to analyze, critically evaluate, and complete arguments. Each logical reasoning question will contain a short passage that will require you to complete some form of logical analysis. According to LSAC, “The questions are designed to assess a wide range of skills involved in thinking critically, with an emphasis on skills that are central to legal reasoning.” These skills include:

- Recognizing the parts of an argument and their relationships
- Recognizing similarities and differences between patterns of reasoning
- Drawing well-supported conclusions
- Reasoning by analogy
- Recognizing misunderstandings or points of disagreement
- Determining how additional evidence affects an argument
- Detecting assumptions made by particular arguments
- Identifying and applying principles or rules
- Identifying flaws in arguments
- Identifying explanations

The questions in the logical reasoning section contain arguments similar to those used in law school. However, the content of the arguments is not legally based and does not require any prior knowledge beyond a university-level understanding of premises, assumptions and conclusions.

Sample Question (from LSAC website):

Laird: Pure research provides us with new technologies that contribute to saving lives. Even more worthwhile than this, however, is its role in expanding our knowledge and providing new, unexplored ideas.

Kim: Your priorities are mistaken. Saving lives is what counts most of all. Without pure research, medicine would not be as advanced as it is.

Laird and Kim disagree on whether pure research

(a) Derives its significance in part from its providing new technologies
(b) Expands the boundaries of our knowledge of medicine
(c) Should have the saving of human lives as an important goal
(d) Has its most valuable achievements in medical applications
(e) Has any value apart from its role in providing new technologies to save lives

Answer and Explanation

This question asks you to identify the point on which Laird and Kim disagree with respect to pure research. Laird identifies two contributions of pure research: its medical applications (“technologies that contribute to saving lives”) and its role in expanding knowledge and providing new ideas. Of these, Laird considers the second contribution to be more worthwhile. Kim, on the other hand, maintains that “Saving lives is what counts most of all.” Since pure research saves lives through medical applications, Kim disagrees with Laird about whether pure research has its most valuable achievements in medical applications. The correct response, therefore, is (D).

Analytical Reasoning

The Analytical Reasoning section is often referred to as the “games section.” The “games” often give applicants the most trouble, since they are likely different from any kind of standardized test question previously faced. On the flip side, most students also see the biggest improvements in their scores on this section, once they understand how to approach them.

According to LSAC, the analytical reasoning questions are designed to assess your ability to consider a group of facts or rules, and then determine what could or must be true based on those facts or rules. In each game, you will be asked to make deductions about people, places or things; the content will be unrelated to the law. The games section will contain four games each with 5-8 associated questions.
For some people, the games will just click. For most people, the games are challenging and not necessarily intuitive. If you are struggling with the games, we strongly suggest you get some kind of tutoring or take a professional LSAT prep course. A tutor or prep course will teach you the proper way to set up the games, which will make them much easier to solve. Once you get the hang of it, you’ll be able to answer more questions correctly and in less time.

Sample Game (from LSAC website):

A university library budget committee must reduce exactly five of eight areas of expenditure — G, L, M, N, P, R, S, and W — in accordance with the following conditions:

- If both G and S are reduced, W is also reduced.
- If N is reduced, neither R nor S is reduced.
- If P is reduced, L is not reduced.
- Of the three areas L, M, and R, exactly two are reduced.

If both M and R are reduced, which one of the following is a pair of areas neither of which could be reduced?

(a) G, L
(b) G, N
(c) L, N
(d) L, P
(e) P, S

Answer and Explanation

This question concerns a committee’s decision about which five of eight areas of expenditure to reduce. The question requires you to suppose that M and R are among the areas that are to be reduced, and then to determine which pair of areas could not also be among the five areas that are reduced.

The fourth condition given in the passage on which this question is based requires that exactly two of M, R, and L are reduced. Since the question asks us to suppose that both M and R are reduced, we know that L must not be reduced:

Reduced: M, R
Not reduced: L

The second condition requires that if N is reduced, neither R nor S is reduced. So N and R cannot both be reduced. Here, since R is reduced, we know that N cannot be. Thus, adding this to what we’ve determined so far, we know that L and N are a pair of areas that cannot both be reduced if both M and R are reduced:

Reduced: M, R
Not reduced: L, N

Answer choice (C) is therefore the correct answer, and you are done.

PREPARING FOR THE LSAT

Hopefully it’s obvious by now that the LSAT requires a LOT of preparation. Depending on your natural test-taking ability, diligence, and the amount of study time you have available, we recommend giving yourself at least 6 months (or more depending on how much you want to improve). You should also give yourself plenty of buffer time between the first time you take the test and your application deadline to make sure you can re-take the test if you need to. We suggest you schedule a test date at least four months from the day you start studying— this will give you a goal to strive for and an incentive to start studying diligently.
As you start preparing, your first step should be a trip to the LSAC website to look through their page on LSAT prep materials. You can also get several free practice tests from the LSAC website. We recommend you start by taking at least one (if not 2-3) full length practice tests under timed conditions, in order to establish your baseline. This will give you a good idea of where you stand in terms of overall score, how much time you may need to dedicate to improvement, and which areas you need to focus on most. From there, you can determine which method of preparation is best for you.

In addition to self-studying, many applicants will get tutoring for specific sections or take a formal prep course (either online or in person) to help them maximize their performance on the test. We generally recommend doing so, particularly if you are interested in a T14 school and need to significantly increase your score in order to be competitive. Service to School has negotiated discounts with good test prep companies, and there are even some free resources out there, so be sure to talk to your S2S ambassadors about your options.

If a prep course is not an option for some reason and you decide to self-study, we recommend using the PowerScore Bibles and taking timed, full-length practice tests at regular intervals to check your progress. LSAC publishes its old exams individually and in books of 10, which you can buy either as ebooks or in hard copy from various retailers. Based on your progress on the full-length practice tests, you can then tailor your study plan to focus on your areas of weakness (certain sections, types of questions, timing, etc.).

Everybody has their own study habits and test-taking strategies. What works for you might not work for someone else, and vice versa. That said, here are a couple of general tips for studying and taking the LSAT.

**Train Like You Fight.** This is a common adage in the military. The same holds true for taking the LSAT. You need to practice under realistic conditions as much as possible, which means taking plenty of full-length practice tests under time pressure. It’s critical that you learn not only how to answer the questions, but how to do so within the time constraints of the test. However you choose to study during the week, we recommend taking a timed, full-length practice test every weekend. Then carefully analyze your results after each test and make sure you understand what you missed and why.

**Find a Way To Relax.** The LSAT can be a stressful experience, especially as test day draws near. You need to develop a routine to help you relax. Whether it’s working out early in the morning every day or taking a yoga class the night before each practice test, develop a strategy so you can sleep easily the night before the test.

**CANCELING A SCORE AND MULTIPLE SCORES**

The question may come up—what should you do if you screw up or simply think you didn’t perform your best on test day?

Before you finish taking the test and for six days afterwards, you have the option of canceling your score. LSAC provides clear guidance for how to do so on its website. If you cancel your score, admissions officers will see that you took the test and canceled it, but they will not see what score you received.

**It will not hurt you if you cancel a score (once).** Admissions officers understand that everyone has a bad day now and then, or that something may have happened to you during the test. However, if you cancel more than once, you risk it appearing like you can’t handle the pressure of the exam, which will likely hurt your candidacy. You should not necessarily cancel your score just because you thought the test was difficult. Remember, the LSAT is graded on a curve, so if you found it more difficult than usual, the likelihood is that everyone else did too. Ultimately, if you know with out a doubt that you scored lower than you wanted, you can cancel your score. But only one time—after that, plan on taking the test for keeps.

The next question is what you should do if you receive your results and your score is lower than you wanted. The short answer is take the test again. Schools will see the results from all tests you have taken in the past five years, but they mostly care about your top score. They understand that it takes practice to do well and appreciate the determination and diligence required to make progress. **There’s no harm in**
trying again if you're confident you can do better, but there's also no point in retaking the test if
you're just going to get roughly the same score. As a reminder, you can only take the test three times
in any two-year period (this includes scores you cancel), so make sure you have a solid plan for how to
improve prior to registering again.
CHAPTER 5: TRANSCRIPTS AND THE ASR

SENDING TRANSCRIPTS TO LSAC

As part of your law school applications, you will need to submit your academic transcripts through the LSAC Credential Assembly Service. You will download from the LSAC website a transcript request form for each institution you attended and send the form to the school(s). The school(s) will then send your transcripts directly to LSAC (NOT to you). It usually takes LSAC about three to four weeks to process your transcripts, on top of however long it takes for your school to send them out, so plan accordingly and take care of this step early in the process.

Law schools require transcripts from your primary undergraduate institution as well as any other institutions from which you received college-level credit:

- Community colleges
- Undergraduate and graduate institutions
- Law/medical/professional institutions
- Institutions attended for summer or evening courses
- Institutions attended even though a degree was never received
- Institutions from which you took college-level courses in High School
- Institutions that sponsored overseas study
- International Transcripts

You can find more information about submitting transcripts and which transcripts you need to submit on the LSAC website.

ACADEMIC SUMMARY REPORT

Once all your transcripts have been received, LSAC will create an Academic Summary Report that summarizes your undergraduate work using an index based on LSAC's data of all students from your undergraduate university that have ever applied through LSAC. The ASR will be sent to your schools along with a copy of all of your transcripts.

An important thing to understand is that LSAC may compute your GPA differently from your undergraduate college for several reasons. First, LSAC will include summer school courses, study abroad courses, and repeated courses in your GPA, even if your college didn't factor those into its own calculation of your GPA. You can find a complete listing of policies here. Second, many colleges use different types of grading curves and practices. LSAC attempts to put your GPA into the context of your own school's practices. It does that by comparing your GPA to other students from your college who applied to law school and assigns you a percentile for comparison purposes. Lastly, LSAC will calculate and list your GPA by year as well as cumulatively for each year you attended an undergraduate institution. It will also show how many credit hours you took that year. This allows schools to track your progress throughout your undergraduate career to see any improvements or changes in workload.

FACTORS SCHOOLS TAKE INTO ACCOUNT

Every law school admissions officer will tell you that your undergraduate GPA is a primary factor in admissions decisions – this is why LSAC provides detailed statistics comparing you to other applicants from your undergraduate institution– but there are some additional factors that schools take into account when assessing your academic record. It helps to understand these other considerations because you can use them to your advantage, either to highlight strengths or mitigate weaknesses in your record.

Quality of School. There is obviously a big difference between a 3.3 GPA from a top ten school and a 3.8 GPA from a less demanding school. If you have a low GPA but went to a top school or a school known for significant grade deflation, admissions officers will take this into account. This is why LSAC includes statistics about all students from your school that have applied to law school, so you can be compared
against your peers and have your grades put into context. That said, just because you went to a good school (or conversely if you went to an average school), don't think that the numbers themselves don't matter— a student with an impressive record from an average school is very likely to be more attractive than someone from an Ivy League who clearly didn't put in much effort once they arrived. Make sure you also choose recommendation letter writers who can highlight your strengths as a student and compare your work ethic and performance in the classroom to those of your peers.

**Choice of Majors.** There is a perception among admissions officers that Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) courses are much more difficult than humanities and social sciences courses. Accordingly, a low overall GPA as a Computer Science major may look better than a high GPA in Communications. Keep in mind, though, that admissions officers want to see how well you did in courses that required skills similar to those you use in law school. So while they may cut you some slack for low grades in STEM courses, the same cannot be said for humanities or social science courses you took. Bottom line: even if you were a STEM major, if you performed poorly in Political Science/History/English/Sociology/etc. classes, be prepared to explain why.

**Course Load.** Another factor that is taken into account is your course load. Did you take more than the required number of courses? Much more? Did you do extensive independent research to supplement your normal courses? Transcripts alone do a poor job of communicating those kinds of things clearly, so you might ask your recommender to spell some of that out or find a way to incorporate these aspects of your academic record into your resume and essays. Make sure the admissions committees have a clear picture of you as a student and how you stack up against the competition.

**Work Experience.** Your GPA also may not reflect your true potential if you worked part-time during college. Make sure you list any work experience on your resume, especially if you had to work in order to fund your education. This is another good topic for your recommender(s) to discuss.

**Performance Trend.** Lastly, admissions officers will look positively upon an upward trend in your academic performance. Even if you struggled in the first year or two of college (as many people do), showing significant growth and improvement over time and finishing strong can redeem a low overall GPA. The trend in your performance should be obvious from your transcript and your Academic Summary Report, but you can also write an optional addendum if you want to explain any shifts or anomalies. You should definitely consider doing so if you had a downward trend over time and there are good reasons for it (i.e. you had to start working part-time or took on a brutal workload). Otherwise, you leave it to the admissions committee to wonder about whether or not you can handle a rigorous academic program.

If any of these factors apply to you, emphasize them in your application. You can either explicitly address them in your addendum essays (more on this in Chapter 7), or use your resume and recommendation letters to cover them. The important thing is to ensure that the admissions officers understand why your academic record looks the way it does.
CHAPTER 6: THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

We come to it at last: the dreaded “personal statement.” This is the part of the application that many applicants fear the most. Some applicants have an unreasonable expectation that their personal statement needs to be earth-shattering, or that they need an incredibly memorable and dramatic story. That’s not the case. Even if you weren’t born into poverty, haven’t battled cancer, or didn’t move to India to save thousands of children, you still have an interesting story to tell. So how do all of us normal people write a personal statement?

Well, first of all, you will likely have more interesting stories than most applicants as a result of your time in the military—especially when you consider that a large percentage of applicants are coming straight out of college. But more importantly, the thing to understand about the personal statement is that how you write matters as much as what you write about. There are two reasons for this: 1) law schools use the personal statement to evaluate your writing ability, which is a crucial skill for law students and lawyers; and 2) good writing can turn the most ordinary story into a something interesting to read.

An engaging writing style makes your personal statement authentic, lively, and interesting, even if the story is somewhat routine. This should give you confidence going into the personal statement because your writing is entirely under your control—and great writing largely comes down to revision, revision, and more revision.

As you begin writing, we have several recommendations that will help you with your writing style. We like William Zinsser’s On Writing Well and James Kilpatrick’s The Writer’s Art. These two books cover the basics of great writing and will give you a solid foundation as you begin your personal statement.

WHY DOES THE PERSONAL STATEMENT MATTER SO MUCH?

To gain admission to elite schools, you have to be more than just your numbers. This is where the personal statement comes in. While your LSAT and GPA will speak to your intelligence and work ethic, your personal statement will show something essential about who you are and what special qualities you will bring to a law school program. (Don’t worry about looking “unique,” even for top law schools. Most people, frankly, aren’t the only this-or-that on the planet, and that’s perfectly fine. Don’t hold yourself to that standard.) If done well, the personal statement can elevate an application with slightly weaker numbers. Typically, though, you can’t write your way around flat-out non-competitive numbers, so manage your expectations.

The weight given to personal statements will vary by school. If you are applying to a Top-14 law school, the personal statement will be crucial. The top programs get thousands of applications a year and turn away lots of people with good LSAT and GPA numbers. A good personal statement helps you stand out from the crowd and can convince an admissions committee that you are worth having in their classrooms.

Your personal statement conveys more about you than just the words you put on paper. Your maturity and self-reflection about the course of your life and your future career should be evident, and your choice of topic should reflect your personality and priorities. Your ultimate goal with the personal statement goal is to allow your energy, passions, and goals to shine through.

Check out the thoughts of Dean Asha Rangappa, Dean of Admissions at Yale Law School, on this subject.

WHY THIS WORKS IN YOUR FAVOR

The impact that a personal statement can have works in your favor—if you know how to make the most of it. Admissions committees actually look forward to reading the thousands of essays that come in every year and learning more about the applicants. So they are disappointed when they receive essays that are
dry, boring, clichéd, error-riddled, and predictable. A trite or lifeless essay can spoil an otherwise compelling application.

And this gives you an advantage. If you make your statement truly personal, introspective, and alive with detail, you will capture the attention and imagination of the reader. The best way to do this is to tell a good story. Take the reader on an emotional ride. This is not a term paper or a book report, and it’s certainly not supposed to show you can “write like a lawyer.” Tell a story that only you can tell, in your own voice. This shouldn’t be difficult for a military veteran.
PERSONAL STORIES VS. PROFESSIONAL ESSAYS

Essays can be roughly categorized as either personal or professional. A “personal” essay will focus on some aspect of you that is separate from your career and not immediately related to your reasons for wanting to be a lawyer. A “professional” essay will focus more on your professional life and your future career goals. The two can blend together, but this must be done carefully; if you try to cram too much into a two-page essay you risk producing a statement that feels vague and/or forced.

Unless a school expressly asks why you’re applying to law school (the most elite schools typically don’t), you don’t need to focus your essay specifically on that. Admissions officers have read thousands of sappy essays about why someone desperately wants to go to “X Law School” and save the world as a lawyer. Without this burden, you are free to write a great story that highlights who you are as a person. You want the admissions officers, after reading your personal statement, to say, “I like this person and want to get to know them better.”

If an essay prompt requires you to write about your motivations for going to law school, that’s fine. You should still put a personal touch on your motivations for seeking a law degree– the less clichéd and the less abstract, the better. Don’t write about “The Law” in the abstract; write about yourself, your goals, and how law school fits into what you want to accomplish in your life.

Ultimately, you want to find concrete stories that can serve as metaphors for your life, your values, and your personality. Look for stories with the most emotional appeal, conflict, growth, etc. If there is a story that shows your personal transformation and is distinctive just to you, this might be the one you want to use.

WRITING THE ESSAYS

Like many other parts of the application, the personal statement is definitely something that you want to start early and work on often. You will need to go through multiple drafts until it is perfect– there is no such thing as “good enough” here.

Below are tips for crafting a good essay– try to keep them in mind throughout your writing process:

Have an underlying message.
A great story will have one central theme/take-away that the reader can sum up in a single sentence. Be clear in your mind about what that point is. Make sure everything in your essay (It’s short! You’re not writing Moby Dick) drives towards the message you’re trying to convey. Make every word and every sentence count.

Write a memorable story.
A good essay will tell a memorable story. You achieve resonance by being authentic and avoiding clichés, and by using details rather than abstractions or generalizations. Remember, this isn’t a term paper. You can use the first person, dialogue, humor, and any other devices that make sense. It can be happy or sad. It can be funny or serious or both. Ultimately, it must be genuine and resonate on a personal level in order to be memorable.

Show, don’t tell, your story.
Every time you put a word to paper in your essay, think “Show, Don’t Tell.” One of the biggest mistakes writers make is describing who they are, what they have done, what their values are, etc. Instead, you should show the reader those things through the use of anecdotes. Don’t tell the readers that caring for Wounded Warriors is one of your passions– show them by discussing the fundraiser you led, the volunteering you do on weekends, and time you dedicate to working with Wounded Warriors. It’s about walking the walk, not just talking the talk.

KISS.
Be straightforward in your writing. Just because you’re applying to law school doesn’t mean you need to use fancy, hundred-dollar words. But still hold yourself to a high standard– there is no excuse for grammatical mistakes, typos, and clumsy sentences. Keep your language simple and natural, and
avoid unnecessary adjectives and jargon. Make sure to use language everyone (i.e. civilians) can understand. Reread William Zinsser’s *On Writing Well.*

**Don’t use clichés or generalized statements.**
For an admissions officer who reads thousands of essays, there is nothing more frustrating than seeing the same cliches over and over again. For veterans, one such cliche is how a combat deployment demonstrated to you that all people really want the same thing from life– freedom and family. Even if that’s true, the theme shows no real thought on your part. So don’t just sit at that level of abstraction– dig deeper.

**Be strategic about your essays.**
Use your personal statement to show a different side of yourself than what is obvious from the rest of the application. Write about something that is not reflected in your resume, GPA, or letters of recommendation. This will help you make sure you hit all of the important parts of your candidacy that you want to get across.

**Don’t whine, complain, or exaggerate.**
If you are describing a difficult experience you went through, make sure you do not come across as whiny or bitter. Cynicism isn’t interesting. And do not exaggerate anything in your essays to make yourself look better. Doing so is dishonest and unbecoming of military veterans, and will also sink your application if you are caught.

**Write with energy and passion.**
With so many things to keep in mind, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that reading your essay should be an enjoyable and thought-provoking experience for the reader. After you have finished multiple drafts, take a step back and reassess whether you have captured something important about you in those two pages. If not, figure out whether 1) you haven’t picked a topic that distills something important about you, in which case you have to go back to the drawing board, or 2) you have picked the right topic but you need to work some more on the execution.

**Engage the reader with a great opening.**
Your first paragraph should set the scene for the rest of the essay and capture the reader’s attention. You don’t need to shock the reader, just give them something that will make them want to keep reading. **DO NOT** use a quotation from a famous person. It’s lazy and overdone.

**Don’t finish with a conclusion.**
You do not need a tidy, meaningful conclusion for the essay. You don’t need to summarize what you’ve just said, and you also don’t need to end by explaining why you want to go to law school– and/or that school in particular– **unless a school expressly asks for that.** But you can do this if it makes sense. Your personal statement is about you, so figure out what sort of conclusion/wrap-up feels natural.

**Page Limit and Formatting.**
If the school does not specify a page or word limit, keep your essay to 2-3 pages double-spaced, size 11 or 12 Times New Roman font. The margins should be about one inch on all sides. Do not write less than one page or more than three pages, unless a school explicitly invites you to do so.

**Read your essay out loud.**
Your essay will be read very quickly and probably only once, so it’s crucial that it flows well and leaves the right impression. Reading your essay out loud will help you figure out if you passed the KISS test and will allow you to get a better sense for the flow of it– which words are not right, which sentences are clunky, which are too hard to follow, etc. You want the essay to sound conversational, not formal. Put yourself in the position of an admissions officer reading/hearing your essay for the first time– is your language crisp, does your structure make sense, are your anecdotes lively, and does the whole package convey what you want it to?
CHAPTER 7: ADDENDA & OPTIONAL ESSAYS

WHEN TO WRITE AN ADDENDUM ESSAY

The addendum essay can be used to explain something that law schools might perceive as a weakness, or it can address a disclosure about which the school requires more information. You'll see questions about academic and disciplinary problems in college as well as run-ins with the law, and have to explain anything that applies to you in an addendum. A prompt may require you to disclose past offenses even if they expunged from your record or you were a juvenile, so read carefully. Your S2S ambassador can help you dissect the disclosure questions on your applications and figure out 1) whether you need to disclose at all, and 2) if so, how best to explain what happened.

Aside from required addenda, there are also additional subjects that you may want to address. For instance, you could explain why you canceled LSAT scores more than once, or why there was a downward trend in your GPA. Whatever the topic, if you do choose to write an addendum essay, here are the major guidelines:

- Keep it brief and don’t whine. A few paragraphs is usually long enough.
- Explain the issue, but resolve it by showing that it is no longer a problem. You don’t want admissions officers to worry about a recurrence in law school.
- Be open and honest about what happened. Explain the situation in a direct and mature manner. Accept responsibility and demonstrate that it’s in your past.
- Use good judgment about what information you provide and how you frame things. Don’t just say you received low grades freshman year because you partied too much. Explain that you were not prepared for the rigours of undergraduate life freshman year, and that you worked diligently to improve in subsequent years.

OPTIONAL ESSAYS

Many schools will also give you the chance to write “optional essays.” The most common optional essay is the diversity essay, but you might also see essay questions about “Why our school?” and “Explain your career goals.” These essays tend to be shorter than the personal statement (usually one page). There is no harm in not writing one of these, but if done well they can add value to your application and show schools that you care enough to do the extra work.

In particular, if the school gives you a “Why our school?” question, you should absolutely answer it and put some real thought into it. If you don’t, you signal to the school that you may not care much about them and may not really want to attend. Typical reasons for wanting to attend a specific school are location (desire to live/practice in a certain region), professors who specialize in something you are interested in, great placement in an area of the law or particular employment community (JAG, immigration, criminal law reform, mergers & acquisitions, whatever), specific clinics or extracurricular programs that you care about, and the veterans community. If you choose to answer this question, research all of these things so that you can speak intelligently about them in your essay. And use your S2S network of current law students who can help you with school-specific information.
CHAPTER 8: YOUR RESUME

Your resume is one of your best weapons. On a single page, you get to present the most important and distinctive parts of your candidacy to an admissions committee. This is your chance to show off the great things you have accomplished and the activities you care about. If you have never written a resume before, there are many resources out there that can help you. The US Chamber of Commerce and Hire Our Heroes have teamed up to create a resume builder specifically for veterans at https://www.resumeengine.org. S2S also has models we can send you.

However, even though there are plenty of resume building services and templates out there, do NOT rely on them exclusively. A resume should always have a specific purpose and be tailored to you and to the position/program for which you are applying. A resume for a construction job should look very different from a resume for a teaching job, even if the same person is applying for both. Similarly, your resume for law school should be created specifically for that purpose. We will now go through some key points that your law school resume should hit.

CREATING A LAW SCHOOL RESUME

Your resume should begin with your full name centered at the top. Under your name include your address, phone number, and email.

The first section of your resume should be your Education. You should include any schools that you have attended since high school (excluding high school) in reverse chronological order (most recent first). For each school, include the name of the university, degree/major, and year of attendance or graduation. You do NOT need to include summer school or one-off classes at other institutions unless they demonstrate something significant about your efforts to prepare yourself academically or your intellectual interests. You should also use this section to list any honors you received and important activities or leadership roles you had as an undergraduate, unless you list them later in an extracurricular activities/community service section. Ditto for any graduate programs you may have completed.

The next section should be your Work Experience. List your jobs in reverse chronological order with the name of the organization, your job title, start and end dates, and location. For each job, you should include bullets that detail the results you achieved in the job. As a rule of thumb, list all substantive jobs and internships you have held– you don’t need to throw in everything you’ve ever done.

If applicable, highlight additional strengths in your record in the next section: Extracurricular Activities, Community Service, Publications, International Experience, etc. The point of this section is to demonstrate what you are passionate about and that you have a life outside of work and school. For any activities, include the amount of time you spent on each activity during the week/month.

You should also include a section with any awards or special Professional Distinctions (Ranger Tab, Bronze Star, Purple Heart, etc.), and if it makes sense, you can add a Personal section with language skills and hobbies. But do not repeat items already listed elsewhere on the resume.

Do not include an Objectives, Skills, or High School section. Your objective is obvious– you are applying to law school. You do not need a skills section because you are applying to school, not for a job. And high school is too far in the past for anyone to care what you did.

NOTES ON RESUME STYLE AND CONTENT

There are several style guidelines for your resume. Three of these are iron-clad rules:

- Always use the third person
- Use action words for your descriptions
- Use the past tense for jobs or roles that have already ended

In addition to these rules, here are some suggestions on style. First, you should use Times New Roman and 11 or 12 size font. Anything smaller is just too hard for admissions officers to read. You should have one inch margins on all four sides, and some white space in between sections. You should have a logical,
consistent, and easy-to-follow format. Remember KISS and don’t try to make it visually “interesting.” Also, your grammar, spelling, and wording need to be perfect. There is no excuse for these kinds of errors. If you are using a Mac or word-processing software other than Word, we recommend turning your resume into a PDF to ensure the formatting doesn’t get screwed up when the admissions officers open the document.

The contents of your resume should ideally fit on one page (and some schools will specify a one-page resume), but if you’ve been out of college for more than 5 years or so and your military role requires some explanation, a two-page resume is acceptable. But do not go over to two-pages—pick and choose the most important things to make the cut. And ensure you have enough white space on the page to make it easily readable at a glance.

There are a number of common mistakes that applicants make on resumes. We will go through each one and how to fix them.

**Listing Responsibilities Rather than Showing Results.** The first common resume mistake is to describe the responsibilities you had during your jobs and activities rather than the results you achieved. The focus should be on what you accomplished. To the best of your ability, try to quantify your achievements. If you have been the best at something, the proof is in a ranking, personnel evaluation, or award.

**Failing to Use Action Verbs.** Never use passive voice and vary your action verbs. Don’t just say "participated in X, participated in Y, participated in Z." When you describe your accomplishments, to the extent possible, use leadership-oriented verbs such as “led,” “managed,” “coordinated,” and “supervised.” **But do not overstate your role** and say you led something when you really didn’t.

**Stretching the Extent of Your Involvement.** Do not exaggerate and definitely do not lie about anything on the application. Deep involvement in one or two activities is much better than superficial involvement in many activities. **Focus on showcasing the significance of what you did do.**

**TRANSLATING MILITARY EXPERIENCE INTO CIVILIAN TERMS**

At first, it can be difficult for veterans to translate their military experience into terms that civilians can easily understand. For example, an admissions committee likely won’t know what a Stryker Brigade or a Marine Expeditionary Unit is, and they may not know what being a squad leader, platoon commander, or company commander means in terms of leadership experience. Definitely avoid all military jargon and acronyms—you will quickly lose people if you thrown in things like E-5, O-3, TAD, OER, MOS, etc. You have to do your best to translate these experiences and responsibilities into plain English so that anyone can understand them. For instance, if you were a platoon commander for a Tank Platoon, a bullet point could read: “Managed and supervised a 30-person unit in the employment, maintenance, and care of $30M worth of vehicles and equipment.” A good test is to give your resume to several friends—no less than three—who have no military background. Ask them if they understand what you are describing. If not, ask for suggestions on better phrasing.
JOHN A. BASILONE  
CAPTAIN, USMC  
john.basilone@gmail.com  888.444.5555

EDUCATION
2014-2018  
YALE LAW SCHOOL  
NEW HAVEN, CT  
JD Candidate, Joint Degree with Stanford Business School

2015-2017  
STANFORD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS (GSB)  
PALO ALTO, CA  
MBA Candidate, Joint Degree with Yale Law School.

2005-2009  
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY  
PRINCETON, NJ  
Bachelor of Arts, Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs and Public Policy (WWS)  
GPA: 3.86; Departmental GPA: 4.0; Summa Cum Laude; Phi Beta Kappa  
Student Groups Liaison: Chaired 6-person committee; managed $1M student activities budget.  
President of AEPi: Authored chapter constitution; broadened membership from 30-50.  
Afghan Task Force Senior Coordinator: Led 15-student task force on UN Role in Afghanistan.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE
2012-Present  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS  
CAMP PENDLETON, CA  
Infantry Tactics Advisor, 215th Corps Afghan National Army (ANA), Helmand AFG  
Ranked #1 of 7 Lieutenants evaluated by senior supervisor for performance and leadership.  
Instructed 30 Afghan officers in infantry tactics, operations orders, and leadership technique.  
Developed a three-week Officer Tactical Leadership course for Afghan officers as part of the Regional Corps Battle School, a newly created advanced infantry training center for the 215 Corps.

2011-2012  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS  
CAMP PENDLETON, CA  
Executive Officer, India Company, 3rd Battalion 1st Marines  
Ranked #1 of 23 Lieutenants evaluated by senior supervisor for overall performance and leadership.  
Led a 165-Marine Infantry Company during a combat deployment to Asia and Middle East.  
Planned and executed joint military training exercises with civilian and military allies in Malaysia, Jordan, Singapore, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Djibouti, and Bahrain.  
Employed weapons, vehicles and equipment totaling more than $5M in seven countries.  
Responsible for the safety of 165 Marines during combat missions and high-risk operations.

2010-2011  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS  
CAMP PENDLETON, CA  
Weapons Platoon Commander, India Company, 3rd Battalion 1st Marines  
Ranked #1 of 13 Lieutenants evaluated by supervisor for overall performance and leadership.  
Led senior infantry platoon of 48 Marines during pre-deployment training at Camp Pendleton.  
Planned and executed joint military training exercises with civilian and military allies in Malaysia, Jordan, Singapore, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Djibouti, and Bahrain.  
Responsible for the safety of 165 Marines during combat missions and high-risk operations.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES
2011-Present  
OPERATION GRATITUDE  
LOS ANGELES, CA  
Military Advisor; voting member of the Board of Directors  
Veterans support non-profit organization providing care packages to deployed service members.

2013-Present  
WARRIORS 2 SCHOLARS  
LOS ANGELES, CA  
Founder and CEO  
Non-profit organization for veterans’ educational preparation program and scholarship foundation.

PUBLICATIONS
JOHN SMITH
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Education
United States Military Academy
Bachelor of Science in International Relations, Class of 2006
- GPA: 3.60; ranked 160th of 1,001
- Academic Awards and Honors: Distinguished Cadet Award; Dean’s List; National Political Science Honor Society
- Colonel David "Mickey" Marcus Award: Awarded for outstanding achievement in demonstrated leadership in the Jewish Chapel program
- Jewish Chapel Choir – Cadet-in-Charge: Managed and led the Jewish Chapel Choir as it represented the West Point Jewish community and performed at various congregations and universities nationwide
- Other Extracurricular Activities: Intramural wrestling coach; Hillel; Staff leader on Taglit-Birthright Israel trip; Black and Gold Leadership Forum

Experience
Captain, Military Intelligence, United States Army
2009-2011 Human Intelligence (HUMINT) Officer, 3rd BCT/10th Mountain Division
Fort Drum, NY
- Managed operations and training related to HUMINT collection, detainee interrogation and counterintelligence for an infantry brigade consisting of approximately 3,600 soldiers
- Ensured the adherence to law, policy and doctrine of the operations of approximately 20 soldiers, including analysts, HUMINT collectors, interrogators and counterintelligence agents

2008 Deputy Intelligence Officer, Task Force South
Kandahar, AFG
- Hand-selected to assist in managing an intelligence element consisting of 65 soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen for a special operations task force during a 4-month combat deployment
- Supervised a multi-disciplinary intelligence collection and analysis effort that led to the removal of nine high value insurgent leaders from the battlefield across 3 provinces in southern Afghanistan
- Ensured the lawful exploitation, long-term detention and prosecution of insurgent leaders by coordinating with the premier interrogation facility in Afghanistan on a daily basis

2007-2008 Assistant Intelligence Officer, 2-87 Infantry Battalion
Kandahar, AFG / Fort Drum, NY
- Responsible for the timely and accurate intelligence support for an 811-soldier infantry battalion conducting counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan
- Managed the collection efforts of specialized signals intelligence and HUMINT elements, leading to the detention of 6 high value insurgents and reduction of 22 improvised explosive devices during a 3-month time period
- Led a comprehensive intelligence collection and analysis effort in preparation for an air assault into a remote area of Afghanistan

2006-2007 Intelligence Officer, 710th Brigade Support Battalion
Kandahar, AFG / Fort Drum, NY
- Directed the collection, analysis and dissemination of intelligence for a 1,019-soldier logistical battalion
- Coordinated the intelligence training and preparation for a deployment to Afghanistan, including the creation of a new document defining the battalion’s standard intelligence procedures and the establishment of a company-level intelligence support team
- Planned and implemented a program to train the intelligence section of an Afghan National Army logistical battalion in basic intelligence analysis techniques

Publications
- Article analyzing the attempts of al-Qaeda to appeal to African-American Muslims with nuanced messages based on a perceived prospect of radicalization within the African-American Muslim community

- Op-ed arguing that serving in the U.S. military as a Jew helps the military satisfy institutional needs, reinvigorates a tradition of military service among American Jews and meets civic responsibilities

Additional
- Volunteer for Hugh O’Brian Youth Leadership (HOBY): Led groups of high school students selected by their schools to attend the 2008 HOBY Arizona Youth Leadership Summit and the 2009 HOBY New York Metro Leadership Seminar
- Selected Military Awards: Joint Service Commendation Medal; Army Commendation Medal; Army Achievement Medal; Afghanistan Campaign Medal; Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal; NATO ISAF Medal; Army Punchehut Badge
- Hold an active Top Secret (TS/SCI) security clearance
- Hobbies include skiing, musical theater and college sports (spectator)
HOW MUCH DO LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION MATTER?

Tremendously. Why? Because a bad recommendation letter can destroy your chances of gaining admission, particularly to a top school. And when we say a “bad recommendation letter,” we don’t just mean a negative one (though admissions committees do sometimes receive these). We mean a poorly written, dry, or generic letter; a letter that points to a deal-breaking flaw; or a letter that shows no enthusiasm for, or even familiarity with, the applicant. Admissions committees are experts at deciphering recommendation letters— they have read thousands of them. They can tell when the recommender feels passionate about the candidate, and they can also tell when the recommender does not really care. Even if your recommender says positive things, if they do so without clear conviction, admissions officials will read between the lines.

Recommendation letters give the admissions committee their only outside perspective on you. Admissions officers are looking to see whether you can handle a rigorous academic program and whether you will make the school proud as an alumnus. They want to know about both your analytical abilities and (if it’s a professional recommendation) your leadership and teamwork skills. Most importantly, they want to get a sense for your personality and character from someone who knows you well and can attest to your performance either at work or in the classroom.

Letters also serve to corroborate (or discredit) what you have written in your application. Do your recommenders echo what you have written or do they present a different picture of you? Recommendation letters should validate your accomplishments, impact, and passions. But if you’ve exaggerated these things, the letters can also bring that to light.

Lastly, the admissions committees use the recommendations to gauge your judgment and ability. First, your choice of recommenders reflects on your judgment. Do not choose someone to write for you who either does not know you well or does not care about your future. The strength of your recommendation letters will also reflect on your ability to cultivate substantive professional relationships with supervisors, teachers, and other mentors, and to “manage up”—that is, to get these important, busy people to write a glowing recommendation letter on your behalf on a deadline. If you cannot find good recommenders, it may indicate to admissions committees that you did not stand out professionally or academically.

This all leads us to the most important point about recommendation letters: you cannot be passive about this part of your application. You have to take an active management role in getting recommendation letters that will complement and support the rest of your application. This is particularly true with military supervisors, who most likely will have little, if any, experience with this kind of letter. You will need to coach your recommenders through the process and tell them what you are hoping the letter with accomplish, but don’t ever tell a recommender what to write— it’s bad form and won’t serve you well. Similarly, if a recommender tells you to write your own letter, keep looking; such letters are rarely as strong as “real” recommendations and it’s hard to write convincingly in someone else’s voice.

WHOM TO ASK FOR RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

Your first step is figuring out whom you want to write your letters. Sometimes, schools will give you guidance on the type of recommender they want to hear from, which is usually an academic professor. To the best of your ability, try to follow the guidance given by the school when they make clear what they want. But do not settle for a poor recommendation letter just to follow their guidance. It is better to have an amazing recommendation letter from an alternative source than a poor one from the preferred source (and most schools acknowledge this in the application). In that case, attach a short addendum to your application explaining why you had to ask someone else.

So, what should you look for in a recommender? We suggest you focus on the following four qualities: strength of relationship, estimation of your worth, writing ability, and reliability.

Strength of Relationship. Your recommender should know you very well. Ideally, he or she will have been a direct supervisor at work or evaluated you directly in the classroom. Just as importantly, the recommender should care about you deeply enough to have a stake in your future and want you to succeed in your career.
Estimation of your Worth. You should pick someone who you know holds you in high esteem. Ideally, your recommender will start off his letter by saying, “Applicant X is one of the best officers/leaders/students I have come across in my twenty years at ABC.” The person should consider you to be among the best in your peer group and should be willing to say so in the letter.

Writing Ability. A well-written letter is simply more persuasive and compelling than a poorly-written one. So all else being equal, you want to choose someone who you know is at least a decent writer. An admissions officer will not hold your recommender’s poor writing against you, but it won’t help your cause, either. If the recommender bumbles through the letter with poor grammar, dry writing, and obvious errors, it distracts the reader, even if the substance is great. It’s not enough that they think the world of you – they also need to be able to convey that effectively.

Reliability. Lastly, you want to consider the person’s reliability. Will they meet the deadlines? Will they follow the guidance you provide them? Are they amenable to your suggestions on how the letter should look and sound? The last one is especially important for military recommenders, since the letter of recommendation format may be different from anything they have written before. They are NOT writing a work evaluation. They are expressing an opinion, based on examples and anecdotes, about how you’re going to fare as a student and a professional in the future, whatever your specific goals happen to be. They need to be relied upon to run with the guidance you give them.

Do not choose someone simply because they have a high position or an important sounding title. It is better to get an amazing recommendation from a Captain than a dull one from a four-star General. High-profile recommenders (e.g. your buddy’s famous uncle in the Senate) don’t do you any good unless you actually worked for them and they can say something substantive about your capabilities and potential. Also, stay away from family members and friends, unless the school specifically asks for a peer recommendation.

EDUCATING YOUR RECOMMENDERS

When you ask people to write a letter of recommendation, you will have to educate them on what the content should be and how to present it. This is especially true for recommenders from a military background. A letter of recommendation is very different from personnel evaluations and fitness reports, and the recommender will have to break out of the generic, dispassionate writing voice used for official correspondence.

When you do ask the person, we recommend that you give them a guidance packet containing your resume, past performance evaluations, a paragraph about your career goals, a paragraph about why you are applying to law school now, and any suggestions on topics or anecdotes that you would like them to touch on in the letter. You should frame them as suggestions only – it is NOT your place to tell a recommender what to write. Your goal is two-fold – you want to make the process as easy as possible for them, and you want to make sure they write the best possible letter that fits your narrative.

If a recommender wants to show you a draft and get your input, that’s fine. If a recommender shows you a copy of the letter after submitting it, that’s also permissible, even if you have officially waived your right to see the letter. Always check the box on the application that waives your right to see the letter. The waiver only encompasses your right to demand to see a copy of the letter in the files of the law school where you eventually enroll. A recommender is free to show you drafts or final copies, but you should NEVER demand to see them. If you are concerned about what a recommender might say about you, you should rethink having them write the letter in the first place.

If your recommender would appreciate some feedback from someone other than you for a gut check, your S2S ambassador can take a look at it and provide feedback to your recommender on a confidential basis.

WHAT THE LETTERS SHOULD SAY

The number #1 rule for letters of recommendation is that “content is king.” The admissions committees are looking for concrete examples that back up the opinion they formed of you from the rest of the
For instance, if the letter says that you are an incredible leader in combat situations, it should include an illustrative anecdote or two. If you are passionate about mentoring and educating your subordinates, then ask a recommender to highlight instances when you went above and beyond to do this. The more specific the stories and examples, the better the letter will be. In your personal essay(s) and resume, you might think it too showy and awkward to mention, for example, that you saved four people in battle. Often, admissions officers learn those kinds of details about applicants from the recommenders only. That is a perfectly appropriate role for them in this process.

Additionally, if you have asked the recommender to write a targeted letter for a specific school, they should be sure to highlight the reason for the targeted letter (i.e. their connection to the school or why that school is your first choice and the best fit).

Just as you shouldn’t use military jargon and overly technical language in your resume, your recommender should avoid these in their letter as well. Ask them to consider the audience when writing the letter and explain any military terms, acronyms, titles, etc. as clearly as possible.

Finally, it is important that your letters showcase genuine enthusiasm. A lukewarm letter will HURT your chances of getting into your dream school.

WHAT THE LETTERS SHOULD LOOK LIKE

The letter should be written with a professional letterhead– a military or university letterhead is fine. If the person is retired, no need for letterhead. The letter should start with an opener like “Dear Sir or Madam.” Do not use a military correspondence format, such as Naval Letter Format. The admissions committees will not appreciate the From, To and Subject lines, and they come off as too impersonal. The letter should be written in size 11 or 12 and Times New Roman font. The letter should end with a signature block and a signature.

In terms of length, the letter should be between 1-2 pages single-spaced. That being said, a short recommendation can be effective depending on what it says (“this is the best student I’ve ever taught at [school X] in twenty years of teaching”). Substance matters a lot more than length.

The letter should open with an explanation of how the recommender knows you (type and length of relationship). This is meant to establish their credibility and give the admissions committees a sense that this person is in a position to give a meaningful opinion about you. For that reason, there should also be some discussion of how closely the recommender has worked with you (either as your teacher or your supervisor), because seeing your work and your performance firsthand matters.

Ideally, your recommender should refer to you by your first name, but it’s fine if they use your rank/title and last name if it fits better. Just make sure they do not refer to you as “the applicant” or “candidate,” and especially not some military expression like “Said Named Officer.”

If you would like to see samples of military letters of recommendation, ask your S2S ambassador for anonymized samples.
APPENDIX A: THE POST-9/11 G.I. BILL

Assuming you are eligible (see here if you are unsure about your eligibility status), the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill will significantly decrease the cost of your law school education. For the year 2016, recipients receiving full Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits receive the following: 36 months of maximum in-state tuition for public schools or the national rate of up to $21,970.46 towards tuition at private schools; a yearly book stipend of $1,000; and a monthly housing allowance (BAH) at E-5 with dependents rate (based on your school’s zip code).

In addition, many private schools now participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program, which you may be eligible for if you qualify for full G.I. Bill benefits. Under that program, a school will contribute a scholarship on top of your existing G.I. Bill benefit, which is then matched by the VA. For instance, let’s say a private school with $50,000/year tuition offers a $10,000 Yellow Ribbon grant— as a recipient of that grant, you would get the $21,970.46 towards tuition from the core G.I. Bill, $10,000 from the school and a matching $10,000 from the VA (for a total of $41,970.46) towards tuition, with BAH on top of all that. This can lower the cost of law school to almost nothing, and many veterans are able to graduate debt-free because of it. Obviously, this changes your calculus considerably. In 2016, 12 of the top 14 law schools were 100% tuition-free for those receiving 100% G.I. Bill/Yellow Ribbon Program assistance. To search for schools currently participating in the Yellow Ribbon Program or to view a particular school’s contribution amount, check out the VA’s YRP page.

Let’s take a look at some 2016 search results for a few schools in Washington D.C. (Data reflects the 2015-2016 school year only):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of College</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Degree Level</th>
<th>Division or School</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Max School Contribution Amt (Per Student/Per Year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The American University</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>$10,965.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American University</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>$3,436.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American University</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Washington College of Law</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>$10,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American University of Rome</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brookings Executive Education</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Catholic University of America</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Catholic University of America</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Undergraduate, Graduate</td>
<td>Metropolitan School of Professional Studies</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Catholic University of America</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>All (Except Law)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Catholic University of America</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Columbus School of Law</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago School of Professional Psychology - Washington DC</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$2,500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago School of Professional Psychology - Washington DC</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$2,500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corcoran College of Art &amp; Design</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>$11,780.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corcoran College of Art &amp; Design</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>$8,273.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican House of Studies</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
<td>$7,560.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican House of Studies</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
<td>$7,560.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallaudet University</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>$3,557.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A few things to note– some schools have different contribution amounts depending on the type of degree you are pursuing. For example, at American University, the Yellow Ribbon Scholarship amount for those at the Washington College of Law is $10,000, but only $3,436 in its other graduate programs. Another thing you’ll see is that some schools list dollar amounts while others are designated as “unlimited” Yellow
Ribbon Program contributors, meaning they will contribute whatever amount is necessary to meet the full cost of tuition. Also note that some of these “unlimited” schools have a capped number of scholarships, which means that if there are more veterans seeking (or already receiving) assistance than there are scholarships available, you may not be eligible to receive that money. We recommend calling the financial aid offices of schools you’re considering to ask about the specific details of their Yellow Ribbon contributions for that year. These numbers can and do change year-to-year, so it’s that important you find the most current information out there.

One last thing to keep in mind when looking up Yellow Ribbon schools– some public schools may appear not to participate in this program, but that does not mean they are not tuition-free for veterans. Many public universities offer in-state tuition for veterans, in which case your degree would already be covered in full by the core G.I. Bill.

APPENDIX B: EVALUATING DEBT

As we discussed in the introduction, there is an increasing number of law school graduates who emerge from law school worse off than when they went in– you should definitely think twice before taking on an amount of debt that you might not be able to service (remember the guideline of total law school debt < 1.5x starting salary). If you’re facing an intimidating amount of debt as part of your decision to attend law school, there are a number of options to consider before you change course. If you are not eligible for the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, do not plan to use it to attend law school, or wish to attend a school with limited or no YRP funding, there are other ways to reduce the amount of debt you might incur by attending law school.

Most schools offer some combination of need and merit-based scholarships. The ABA requires law schools to release to the public the distribution of scholarship awards among students, as well as the average dollar amount of said scholarships. When it comes to scholarships, it’s critical that you read the fine print (beginning with reading the ABA disclosures for the schools you’re considering), as a large number of them come with conditions. First, you should understand the approved usage of scholarship funds. There are some veterans who mistakenly believe that if they are awarded a $100,000 scholarship but already have tuition covered by the G.I. Bill, they will be able to keep that money. But the majority of scholarships awarded by law schools are considered “tuition only,” and cannot be used for living expenses, books, or any other purposes. More importantly, you need to know what the conditions are for maintaining your scholarship after you enroll. Below is a portion of one law school’s ABA required disclosures (also known as a 509 Disclosure).
While more than half of the students at this school were awarded grants in the 2014-2015 academic year, more than one third of students entering with scholarships had them reduced or eliminated in each of the subsequent years. Scholarships can come with conditions (most often tied to academic standing and minimum GPAs), so do your homework and find out all the terms of your offer before accepting.

If a school's scholarship/financial aid package still puts you in bad territory with regard to debt, you might also consider applying for outside scholarships through organizations like the Pat Tillman Foundation (your S2S ambassador can give you more insight into some of these options). Another potential course of action for managing law school debt comes in the form of loan repayment programs. Many schools offer loan repayment assistance programs (LRAPs) that provide financial assistance to law school graduates working in government, the public interest sector, or other comparatively low-paying fields. The terms of these programs vary widely, so we highly recommend contacting the schools you’re interested in to learn more about the specific terms of their loan assistance program.

**APPENDIX C: EVALUATING EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS**

Like with the 509 disclosures for enrollment and scholarships, law schools are required to release data on the employment outcomes of their graduates. Let’s take a look at the 2014-2015 employment data for two law schools located in the same city. We'll call them Law School A and Law School B.

**LAW SCHOOL A:**
From a graduating class of 415, 267 Law School A graduates found full-time long-term employment either requiring bar passage or for which holding a JD is considered an advantage (just over 63%), while 55 were classified as unemployed (13.2%). Of the 138 graduates who found employment at law firms, most were employed by small law firms of 10 lawyers or fewer, which typically pay less than the largest law firms.
At Law School B, 463 of its 479 graduates found full-time long-term employment either requiring bar passage or for which holding a JD is considered an advantage (96.6%), while 6 were classified as unemployed (1.2%). Of the 323 graduates who found employment at law firms, 261 of them (80.8%) were employed by firms of 501 lawyers or more.

It’s not very hard to see that Law School B’s graduates fare much better in finding employment out of law school than the graduates of Law School A. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that choosing to attend Law School A is an objectively bad choice or that attending Law School B is an objectively good one. Is someone who graduates from Law School B with $350,000 of debt better off than a graduate of Law School A who emerges debt-free? There’s no definitive answer—only by projecting employment outcomes and forecasting debt can you answer for yourself whether or not law school is a good investment.
CONCLUSION

Good luck with your admissions process! We are here to help. It will be over before you know it, and you will be on to the next stage in your career. Enjoy the process as best you can. This is a great chance to reflect on your personal and professional development so far, clarify your goals, and set yourself up for long-term success.

We also have a favor to ask: if you've benefitted from the help you've received from Service to School, please fill out our exit survey and consider paying it forward once you're settled in at law school by serving as an ambassador!