**Law School Application Essays**

Writing a good application essay is hard. Mind-bendingly hard. I get it. I wrote some horrible ones, and when I see essays that aren’t ready for prime time, I am entirely sympathetic.

And 100% of the first drafts I see are *not* ready for prime time. Which is fine. You just need to go into this knowing there will be at least three drafts, and probably five, passing back and forth between you and a trusted advisor. I (and/or other Gusties in the legal profession) am happy to be that person for you – so reach out to me ([dcurrell@gustavus.edu](mailto:dcurrell@gustavus.edu)) whether you are a current student or, better yet, a Gustavus graduate who’s now working on law school applications.

Here’s my advice.

Topic selection is often the first barrier – what do I write about, and do I *have* to write about this-or-that thing? Anna Ivey has great essay advice in her [book](https://www.amazon.com/Ivey-Guide-Law-School-Admissions/dp/0156029790) (it’s on reserve in the library) and in [three](https://www.annaivey.com/iveyfiles/do-i-have-to-write-about-x-in-my-law-school-personal-statement) [blog](https://www.annaivey.com/iveyfiles/decoding-your-law-school-essay-questions) [posts](https://www.annaivey.com/iveyfiles/should-you-write-about-topic-x-in-your-law-school-personal-statement) on this issue. Boiled down, her guidance is this:

*What does this total stranger (the admissions officer) need to know about you (1) that will help her "get" who you are and (2) that she won't be able to learn about you in other parts of the application?*

If you’re struggling with what to write about, check out the blog posts above and then let’s talk.

Once you start writing, it is critical to put yourself in the shoes of the reader. He or she has 1,000 or more of these essays to read. Imagine being given 1,000 essays to read. After about five of them, you just want to get to a decision and go to lunch, or coffee, or home. Nearly all of the essays are written by smart people who tend towards verbosity – i.e., in an effort to seem smart, they use three words where one might do. Your job is to wade into this tsunami of paper and make distinctions between the bad ones, the great ones, and the vast middling pile.

What’s at stake? A bad essay will get someone denied no matter how high their LSAT or GPA. A great essay will get a candidate consideration even if her LSAT/GPA are bottom-quartile for the school. (I’m pretty sure my application essay got me into Chicago, and an earlier, much worse essay, got me denied at Michigan and wait-listed at Harvard. These things matter.)

A middling-quality essay might as well never have been written. Don’t write one of those.

What does this all mean? A few things:

1. **Different > Better.** You are more likely to win by writing something that pops off the page than by writing something in beautiful but unmemorable prose. Images and experiences are different; stories are different; things utterly unique to you are different. Proper written English and careful statements about life and the world are a dime a dozen.
2. **Half as long and twice as good.** This is your editorial mantra. You want this thing to be shorter than they ask for. 500-800 words is probably right – but if they give you a word limit, *that’s a maximum, not a minimum*. If you can get it done in half the word limit and do a great job, they will adore you and put your application at the top of the pile.
3. **Show, don’t tell.** Don’t tell them anything. [Show them](https://jerryjenkins.com/show-dont-tell/).
4. **One big thing.** What is the one big thing you want to say? Have you shown it to them in the first paragraph in some way? Will a reader be able to clearly recall your main point an hour after reading your essay?
5. **Crystal clear supporting points.** What are your 2-3 key sub-points, and have you *shown* those to the reader clearly?
6. **[Optional] The dating game.** Some schools aren’t just looking for quality; they are looking for *fit*. You’ll see this in the essay prompt. Show them how you *fit* with their school.