

## So you're thinking about law school . . .

### A Guide for UWSP Pre-Law Students

One of the most common ambitions of political science majors is a career in law. To be sure, the life of an attorney can be rewarding in many ways. But in order to embark on this path, it is important to get a good sense of its demands<sup>5</sup>. Law school – and even the application process itself – can be extremely challenging and tedious. So before you commit to applying for law school, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I find myself taking courses simply because they are easy?
- Do I find myself putting off the readings for my classes? Or neglecting them altogether?
- Do I find myself skipping class because I have other activities? Because I'm catching up on work for my other classes? Because I'm recovering from last night's party?
- Do I find myself sitting in the back of the classroom to avoid being seen by my instructor?
- Does the law appeal to me merely because I am under the impression that it will make me rich?
- Am I comfortable earning a "C" in any class?

If you find yourself answering "yes" to one or more of these questions, law school is probably not for you. This is no sin in the broad sense. There are other career options (though if you find yourself saying "yes" to several of these questions, you probably ought to investigate some new habits). But law school is expensive and highly demanding. They expect from day one that you will show up as a polished student ready to absorb massive quantities of legal doctrine. Skipping readings or classes is negligent as an undergraduate and deadly in law or graduate school. (Note: do not think that you can simply create new habits upon arrival in law school. The best indicator of your law school habits are your undergraduate habits.)

If, by contrast, you answer all of the above questions negatively, you might have what it takes to be a successful law student – and the rest of what is written below is intended for you..

**What should I do to prepare for law school?** – This question depends on where you are in your studies. The following advice is broken down into time-periods.

**Freshman Year** – If you are a freshman convinced you are going to law school after graduation, you should start by examining the questions above. If you find yourself answering “yes” to any of them, now is the time to reform your habits. Sit in the front of the room; attend class regularly; take challenging courses; do your readings diligently; accept nothing less than top-notch work from yourself. Take a broad range of courses satisfying degree requirements and choose a major. While political science is the most popular major among pre-law students, it is by no means required. Students from most all disciplines, including chemistry and music, eventually end up on law school.

**Sophomore Year** – By now, you should have established good habits and a track record of good grades to show for it. It might be wise this year to take Political Science 212 – Law and Legal Systems, which is functionally our introduction to law course, taught by Professor Blakeman. It might also be a good idea to join the Student Legal Society (<http://www.uwsp.edu/stuorg/sls/>). This student organization can provide a support group for pre-law life. It runs the student law office, organizes practice LSAT exams, arranges trips to regional law schools for visits, and occasionally brings in speakers or shows law-related films. This is a good way to know what students ahead of you in the process are doing – and a good way to get sound, experienced advice.

**Junior Year** – This will be your last full year on your transcript when you apply to law school. So it is especially important that your grades are stellar. Even if you have an earlier uneven track record, you can redeem yourself to some degree here with excellent performance. Be sure also in your junior year to seek out courses that emphasize writing and reading skills. Consider pre-law courses like Constitutional Law and Civil Rights & Liberties. These will most closely resemble first-year law school courses. If you find yourself disliking these courses, then law school is probably not for you. If you can’t get enough of this material, this is a sign that you might have chosen the right path. Also consider studying political theory and philosophy courses. These will train you to identify and analyze arguments – a central skill for attorneys. By the second semester of your junior year, you must also take Philosophy 121 – Critical Thinking. More than any other course, this will prepare you for the crucial LSAT exam. Finally, consider applying for a law-related internship senior year.

**Summer between Junior and Senior Years** – You can begin the summer by registering with the LSAC (<http://www.lsat.org/>) and LSDAS (<http://www.lsat.org/applying/lstdas-general-information.asp>). Register soon so that you can take the exam in Stevens Point. If you register late, you might have to drive a hundred miles or so the morning of the exam – which is completely unacceptable. This summer must be in large part dedicated to LSAT preparation. As important as your grades are for law school, the LSAT is arguably even more important. How do law schools distinguish between a 3.5 undergraduate at Harvard versus a 3.5 at UWSP? There are a few measures, but none are as important as performance on the LSAT. Your exam score will not only in large part determine where you go to law school, but also has the capacity to open up substantial scholarship opportunities. In just the past year, two of our students at UWSP earned over \$75,000 in scholarship money largely based on their LSAT performance. So you can see how important this exam is. How, then, do you study for this exam?

- Take a prep course, if at all possible. Prep courses are available in Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and Madison over the summer. If you live anywhere near any of these cities, you should consider taking one of them. They cost approximately \$1,200 – but financial aid is sometimes available. And even though it seems like a lot of money, keep in mind that \$1,200 in the summer can result in tens of thousands of dollars in scholarship money.
- Short of a prep course, design your own study routine. I recommend the following:
  - Purchase two or three study books, available at any bookstore. It is important to buy a study book with practice exams – and just as importantly, explanations of why the right answers are right and the wrong answers are wrong.
  - Take a practice exam under authentic test conditions. Score yourself. Then identify problem areas.
  - Attack those problem areas for the next two or three weeks, studying chapters on those types of questions. Plan on spending one or two hours *every day* throughout the summer. This *must be part of your daily routine*.
  - Take another practice exam. And then repeat the entire process throughout the summer.
  - Plan on taking the exam once in October. Some students register to take the exam in June, which is a mistake because they lose the opportunity to study all summer. The October exam is soon enough after the summer that the lessons are still with you – and also soon enough for you to apply early in the fall.

People might tell you that one cannot prepare for standardized exams. They are wrong. Students who adhere to this advice have done incredibly well on the exam, hence assuring them of far greater opportunities in the admissions process. Also know that your final score is likely to be approximately five points lower than your highest practice exam.

**Fall Semester of Senior Year** – You will have several tasks ahead of you this semester. These include:

- **Requesting Letters of Recommendation** – Seek out three letters of recommendation at the beginning of the fall semester. These should come from university professors rather than bosses or colleagues. This is because you are applying to be a law *student*. Therefore, the assessment of your work as a student is the most useful tool for admissions committees to evaluate your capacity to succeed in law school. Also, be certain to ask professors who satisfy two criteria: 1) you have earned “A’s” from them, and 2) they know you by name. You don’t want a letter in your file either from someone who does not know you very well – or someone who knows you to be a mediocre student. You want your letters to be

glowing. If you suspect a particular professor cannot write a glowing letter, look elsewhere. When you have found willing supporters, provide them with the following materials: 1) a stamped envelope addressed to the LSDAS, 2) the LSDAS letter of recommendation form with all your relevant information filled out, 3) a résumé, 4) samples of your written work for that professor, preferably with that professor's comments on the sample, if possible. Having these materials in order will make the task far easier – which can in turn result in a more positive letter.

- **Begin Checking Out Schools** – Start trying to figure out where you might apply. Keep in mind that while UW—Madison and Marquette are fine law schools, there are many other excellent schools spread throughout the country. Be sure to keep an open mind. You can gauge your chances of admissions in most any law school by checking out this LSAC link: <http://officialguide.lsac.org/UGPAsearch/Search3.aspx?SidString=>. Enter your undergraduate GPA and projected LSAT score. This will tell you your odds of acceptance.
- **Take the LSAT Exam** – Obviously, don't forget to do this.
- **Write a Personal Statement** – Law school admissions officials will see only one sample of your written work. This is the personal statement. Different law schools may prompt you with different questions, but you generally will have a great deal of latitude. Here are lists of things to avoid and things to do.

- **Things to Avoid**

- Avoid clichés like the plague. Never start out with “I have always loved arguing, ever since my earlier experiences at the dinner table.” Law school admissions officials get hundreds and even thousands of these statements and detest them. This will score you zero points – and quite likely knock you down a few.
- Do not convert your résumé into text form. Don't simply recite all of your achievements. For example, avoid this: “As a 3.8 political major, who serves on the student body senate and is involved in the campus Democrats . . .” They already have your résumé. This is redundant and again scores no points with admissions officials.
- Do not submit anything that hasn't been proofread at least twenty times by at least five people. This document is all they have on which to gauge your writing skills. Submission of a sloppy draft will surely leave a deeply negative impression.

- **Things to Do**

- Do submit a clean, well-organized essay – single-spaced between one and two pages.

- Tell them something unique about yourself. This is the only chance for the school to know a little about you as a person. Exploit this opportunity to tell them something about you that might distinguish yourself from others in a positive way. This might take some soul-searching. Ponder it for a while.
  - Create a coherent narrative. Link those unique attributes you bring with you to your future ambitions. How do your talents and/or experiences make you especially well-equipped for a career in the law?
  - Proof-read yet again.
- **Narrow down the List** – After you receive your LSAT scores, narrow down your list of schools. This list should include some safeties (i.e., schools to which you are sure to be accepted), some solids (schools that give you about a 50% chance of admission), and some reaches (schools where you have a 10-25% chance of acceptance). To be sure, the more schools to which you apply, the more options you will have in the spring. Apply to as many as you can comfortably afford, up to a maximum of ten or twelve.
  - **Apply** – Once you've narrowed down the list, go ahead and apply. It is *highly advisable* that you apply *by Thanksgiving*. Studies and circumstantial evidence suggest that this maximizes your chances of acceptance most everywhere. Congratulations, you have completed your work for the fall semester!

**Spring Senior Year** – This will be both the easiest yet most stressful semester of the process. Much of this time will be spent waiting to hear from law schools. Don't get discouraged if you get some early rejections early. Everyone gets them – it's virtually built into the process. And the rejections typically come before the acceptances. Hang in there until you get some good news. After you get acceptances, begin to weigh how attractive each invitation is. Consider geography, financial aid, faculty resources, job placement, etc. You will likely make your final choice in April.