

The Law School Admission Handbook

Prepared By

**Carl Bonomo, Pre-Law Advisor
CUNY, Queens College**

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Chapter 1

Introduction

How to Use This Handbook

It is important to note that while every effort was made to include as much useful information as possible in this handbook we recognize that a myriad of questions will go unanswered here. The purpose in writing this handbook is to facilitate the student's decision-making process around attending law school. This handbook is not designed to take the place of a meeting with the Queens College pre-law advisor, where we can have a meaningful exploration of your desire to go to law school and one can answer any questions you may have about being effective in your efforts. To this end we suggest that besides reading the handbook that you also make an appointment to come and meet with the law school advisor or just stop by during office hours, which are posted in the Political Science Department on the second floor of Powdermaker Hall and on my office door (200Z) in the department. I can also be contacted via email at carl.bonomo@qc.cuny.edu, or by phone at 718.997.5488.

Chapter 2

Why Go to Law School

Why should I go to law school? This seems like a fairly basic and obvious question you should ask yourself before you begin the process of applying to law school. Most students considering law school ask themselves exactly that question. The difficulty is that in order to answer this question accurately you must have information about law school and the legal profession. Too often students make the decision to attend law school based on inadequate information and too little understanding about what the life of a lawyer is like.

Most attend law school in order to become lawyers. But what exactly do lawyers do and is this something you would choose for a career? No student should make a major commitment of resources to pursue a career in a field that he or she knows little about. So the first order of business is to make sure you want to do. And what is that?

What Lawyers Do

On its webpage, LSAC.org/Aboutlawstschool/lawyers-skills.asp, the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) explains what lawyers do in terms of the skills that are required to execute tasks effectively. LSAC states that lawyers require skills to read and listen; analyze; synthesize; advocate; counsel; write; speak; and negotiate. The trouble with describing what lawyers do, based on what skills they need is that those same skills are required in a host of other professions, including businesspeople, professors, a marketing people, medicine, etc. What you really need to know is: **WHAT DO LAWYERS REALLY DO!**

The answer is that the field of law is divided into many diverse areas. In order to answer the question of what lawyers do, we have to first determine what area of law we are talking about. Understandably, most students planning to attend law school are not sure of what type of law they intend to practice, and even if they are sure there is the very real possibility that attending law school could cause them to reconsider their original plan. While it is true that practicing law requires a certain skill set, the actual day-to-day activities of lawyers varies quite a bit, depending upon the field. Simply put, while a patent lawyer and a real estate lawyer may employ the same skills laid out by LSAC, they employ these skills in very different venues and in very different ways.

So in order to decide if you want a career in law you are actually better off starting off with a different question than what do lawyers do?

Here then is one alternate approach. Forget about being a lawyer for a moment and ask yourself, “what am I interested in? Do I like sports; medicine; business; the arts; government etc.?” I realize law is obviously one of your areas of interest or you would not be reading this handbook. Nevertheless, a good way to approach the possibility of a career in law is to first determine what you already have an interest in. Then consider either a career in the law in that area of interest, or try and analyze what it is you like about that area (sports for example) and see if any of those elements are present in the law. For example, suppose you really love sports but you know that for whatever reason you are not able to pursue a professional career in sports. Well, you might find a legal career in sports really appealing, and, knowing that you already like sports, you will probably be more likely to enjoy a career in law that engages the sports world. On the other hand, you would probably not be interested in the area of law dealing with Trusts, Wills and Estates.

I once asked a friend of mine who is a litigator why he likes the law so much. His response was very enlightening. He told me he loved the sport of the law. He explained that as a litigator he had the opportunity to challenge himself intellectually every day and then test

his abilities against those of opposing counsel. Each new case required a game plan and then an execution. For him it was the excitement of learning the facts, planning a strategy and then executing it in the arena of the courtroom.

Once you are successful at figuring out the area of law that interests you, the next step is to learn as much as you can about what lawyers in your “chosen” field do. Just because you like the field does not mean you will automatically like what lawyers do in that field. So a good way to learn what the day-to-day work is like is to try and set up an internship with a firm involved in the area of law that you are considering. One of the best ways to learn what really goes on in any field is to participate in the field, even in a tangential way. Observation is the key. Another benefit of doing an internship is that you will be exposed to practicing attorneys in that area of law, which means you get some face time with them and can ask questions about how THEY feel about their profession. Attorneys are usually not shy about offering their point of view on their profession.

There is a third and final step to this process, answering the question what kind of lifestyle do you want and will a career in law provide such a lifestyle? We are not all cut out to work on oil rigs, drive trucks cross country, or run for the presidency. It is probably a good idea

to do some soul searching about what you really want out of your career. For example, if you want a reasonably predictable 9 to 5 job in law then being a corporate lawyer in a high pressure Manhattan law firm dealing with multi-million or billion dollar contracts is probably not the way to go. Maybe Wills, Trusts and Estates would be a better choice. Once again, internships at the types of law firms you are interested in will help bring some clarity.

Of course, there are several problems with this approach. First, you may have no clue about what you want to do in law, or any other field for that matter. This is actually very common. So it is not so unusual to base a decision about attending law school on, “Well, a law degree can’t hurt, I mean it will never go to waste, right?” Well okay, I guess one could do worse than become a lawyer. I often suggest to students who are in this frame of mind that they should go find out what law school is like. Speak to friends in law school, sit in on a law class, or maybe sit with a law text and do some reading. Since you have no idea about what you want to do you may as well see what it is like to go to law school. The chances are that if law school is not for you then a career in law is probably not the best choice. Now, I am not saying if you do not love law school you will not love being a lawyer. What I am saying is that if you can’t get through law school you cannot become a lawyer, so

making a decision about what type of law you want to practice seems to be more than a bit premature.

Second, some people know they want to be lawyers but have no idea what area of law they will gravitate towards. Fortunately, an important part of attending law school is your exposure to different types of law. Taking classes in various areas of law will help bring some clarity to what area you are most interested in. Also, for those who are certain they KNOW what area of law they are interested in, taking classes in other areas may either confirm your decision or point you in another direction.

I would be remiss if I did not touch on the one reason why most students I see as pre-law advisor tell me they want to go to law school – money. Too many prospective law students I see tell me that making a lot of money is why they are going into law. There are two important things to keep in mind. First, not every lawyer is rich by any means. Second, making a lot of money as an attorney requires a great deal of work, and that usually requires you to make sacrifices in other areas of your life.

REALITY CHECK:

-72.9% of all American lawyers are in private practice. Most of these private firms are very small or in many instances one-person offices.

- 8.2% work for government
- 9.5% work for private industries and associations
- 1.1% work for legal aid or the public defenders office
- 1% work in the legal education
- The median income for law school graduates in both private and public sectors is around \$60,000. (as of 2009)

FYI: There are many types of law and overlap is common. Here are some:

- Corporate and Securities Law
- Criminal Law
- Environmental and Natural Law
- Family and Juvenile Law
- Health Law
- Intellectual Property Law
- International Law
- Tax Law
- Civil Rights

For more detail on these numbers and areas of the law visit LSAC at www.lsac.org/aboutlawschool/fields-of-law.asp.

You should also keep in mind that law school is not just for lawyers. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, many other professions require the same set of analytical skills as the law. Many business people, teachers, politicians, writers, and reporters have legal degrees.

Try to attend several of the seminars we offer here on campus through the President's office and the Pre-Law office. Several times a

year we invite Queens College graduates who are in law school, or are practicing lawyers at various stages in their careers to come and speak to our students. For a list of these events check the bulletin outside the pre-law office, 200Z Powdermaker Hall.

For more ‘inside’ information on law school and the legal profession check out the following books:

Kauffman, George W. *The Lawyers Guide to Balancing Life and Work: Taking the stress Out of Success.* 2nd ed. Chicago: American Bar Association, 2006.

Miller, Robert. *Law School Confidential – A complete Guide to the Law School Experience: by students, for students.* St. Martins Press, 2004. ISBN: 0-312-31881

Moll, Richard W. *The Lure of the Law: Why People Become Lawyers, and What the Profession Does to Them.* New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

Munneke, Gary A. *Careers in Law.* 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.

_____. *The Legal Career Guide: From Law Student to Lawyer.* 4th ed. Career Services. Chicago: American Bar Association, 2003.

_____. *Opportunities in Law Careers.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001.

Schneider, Deborah, and Gary Belsky. *Should You Really Be a Lawyer? The Guide to Smart Career Choices before, during, and after Law School.* LawyerAvenue Press. ISBN: 978-0940675575

Simenhoff, Mark. ed. *My first year as a lawyer: Real-World Stories From American Lawyers.* Walker Company, ISBN: 0-8027-7417-2

Turow, Scott. *One L: The Turbulent True Story of the First Year at Harvard Law School.* Grand Central Publishing, 1997. ISBN: 0-446-67378-1

Chapter 3

Positioning Yourself for Law School Before You Apply

In reality preparing for law school is about developing the set of skills which include analytical/problem solving, critical reading, written and oral communication skills (which by the way includes learning how to listen carefully to others), research skills, the ability to manage your time efficiently, an interest in obtaining a broad understanding of history, political thought, a basic understanding of math and finance, a basic understanding of human behavior and social interaction, and an interest in learning in general. In many ways this preparation begins early in life and continues long after passing the Bar.

Now that you are in college or about to graduate from college how might you make yourself more attractive to prospective law schools. First, you can never start this process too early. If you are just starting college and reading this handbook you are well on your way to laying the preparatory groundwork that will aid you in competing effectively to get into a good law school. If however, you are reading this handbook near the end of your undergraduate college career, as I suspect many of you are, you can still try and make yourself a more attractive candidate for law school.

Of course one of the most important things you can do to help yourself become a more attract candidate for law school is to have a high GPA. Fortunately, a high LSAT, great letters of recommendation, a killer personal statement, interesting demographics and some distinct life experiences will all help you beyond the GPA. Make no mistake about it however; law schools almost always give greater weight to your LSAT score over your GPA and the other parts of your application.

I know placing more weight on an exam that takes only four hours to complete than on a GPA that took four years may seem unfair. But put yourself in the shoes of the typical law school admissions person. He/She receives hundreds of applications from applicants who have attended hundreds of different undergraduate institutions; majored in many different fields; and taken courses that differ from school to school even though courses may cover the same material and may even have the same course name. Those courses are taught by different professors with different approaches and effectiveness with very different requirements and grading systems. In short, when law schools look at one student's 'A' grade in her Constitutional Law class, how do they compare that to another student's 'A' in Constitutional law from a different university, with another professor, using a different approach? Let's be honest; an 'A' is not always an 'A.' Adding to the difficulties, some schools are known to have 'grade inflation.' Harvard is probably

the most well known example of this recently. However, I am happy to report that Queens College is known to have been very consistent in the way it has been grading students over the last 25 years.

Obviously comparing GPAs under these circumstances is not exactly a science. The LSAT however is a standardized test, so comparisons across colleges and universities are more accurate. I said more accurate, not exact. Why are they not exact?

The LSAT exam is not exact because the LSAT exam suffers from exactly the same weakness as all other standardized tests. Some people do not do well on standardized tests, just as some do not do well on essay exams. Nevertheless, this test is as close an approximation of a student's intellectual capabilities as most law schools will be able to discern.

Chapter 4

Choosing the Right Law School

The advice from almost every dean of an ABA-approved law school is that when evaluating a law school it is best to examine the following:

- How large and connected to the school are the alumni?
- How much breadth does the curriculum actually have?
- The extent of their clinical programs?
- What is the cost?
- How accessible are the faculty?
- What law library services are available?
- Where is it located?
- How large are first-year classes?
- What are the areas of faculty expertise?

Choosing the right law school begins with an honest assessment of your academic record, your LSAT score, the demographic you represent, your life experience, and your general application including personal statement, letters of recommendation, and any addenda you submit.

Chapter 5

The Admissions Process

(Getting In)

For many students their understanding of the law school admissions process does not extend much beyond knowing what they have to submit in their applications. For many once they submit their completed application it falls into a black hole of uncertainty.

LSAC has a rather exhaustive list of criteria that law schools may consider during the admissions process. The list can be found at www.lsac.org/Applying/whom-to-admit.asp and consists of the following:

- GPA
- LSAT score
- Undergraduate course of study
- Graduate work, if any
- College attended
- Improvement in grades and grade distribution
- College curricular and extracurricular activities
- Ethnic/racial background
- Individual character and personality
- Letters of recommendation
- Writing Skills

- Personal statement or essay
- Work experience or other post undergraduate experiences
- Community activities
- Motivation to study and reasons for deciding to study law
- State residency
- Obstacles that have been overcome
- Past accomplishments and leadership
- Anything else that stands out in an application

We cover a number of these in greater detail below and throughout the handbook.

Applicants to law school must understand the process of reviewing applications and deciding who to accept, who to waitlist and who to reject deviates from one law school to the next in small, but often important ways. The good news is that there is a great deal of consistency in the review process from law school to law school.

By the time you apply to law school your GPA is reasonably established. What I mean by this is your GPA is probably not going to change very much between the time you apply and the time law schools consider your application. In short, by the time you apply to law schools your GPA is a reality that you will have to work with. The good news is

that if you do exceptionally well on your LSAT exam but have a low GPA (below 3.0) law schools might consider your low GPA as a function of something other than your intellectual abilities. For example, a low GPA of say 3.1 with an LSAT score of 173 would seem to indicate that the 3.1 may not accurately reflect your abilities. On the other hand, a very good GPA of say 3.9 with an LSAT score of 153 might be interpreted to reflect a student with average intellectual capabilities who works very hard at their studies, or perhaps took less than challenging courses or easier professors during the academic career. Of course, it is best to have a high GPA accompanied by an equally high LSAT score.

However, law schools don't look only at your GPA and LSAT score to determine whether or not they should accept you. Although it is your GPA and LSAT score that most law schools look at first, and it is these scores that they primarily use to sort candidates, they do take into consideration other indicators of the likelihood that you will succeed in their law school and beyond, and whether or not you will add to the demographic diversity they are looking to create. Let's look at some of those factors:

Demographics Law schools are always looking to create an incoming class with a reasonable amount of demographic diversity. For example,

if they have an applicant pool that is 90% male and 10% female they would be more likely to accept a larger percent of the female applicants than the male applicants. If a law school were to receive very few applicants from outside its geographic location -- let's say they are located in New England -- the school is likely to look more favorably on the applicant from outside their geographic region. The same holds true of other demographic considerations such as age, race, ethnicity, and religion to name but a few. Simply put law schools are looking for a diverse and interesting population because part of the law school experience is being exposed to a diverse student body. This is not to say that a law school will lower its standards in terms of GPA and LSAT score, but it does mean that wherever possible schools will look to make admissions decisions based on a host of factors including demographic diversity. This goal of diversity can either work for or against a candidate.

Accomplishments One of the most difficult things for law school applicants to do is to put their accomplishments in perspective. If your accomplishments are similar to the accomplishments of many others in the applicant pool, then what you've accomplished is simply going to be less interesting. For example, if you worked full-time while an undergraduate this is fairly common and while it may speak to your maturity, responsibility and hard work ethic, many other applicants have

also worked full-time jobs while in school. If however, you have written a book, been elected to government office, or spent two years in an impoverished country teaching modern farming techniques to poor farmers so they could sustain themselves and their families, such accomplishments are going to be more interesting to law schools because they are rare among law school applicant pools.

Here are some numbers from LSAC for the fall 2008 applicant pool to help place some of the demographics into perspective:

- 26% were 22 years old or younger
- 38% were 23 to 25
- 19% were between 26 and 29
- 8% were 30 to 34
- 9% were over 34 years of age
- 50% of all applicants are women (up from 10% in the early 1970s)
- 84,000 people applied to law schools
- An estimated 24,300 of the 84,00 applicants were minorities

Letters of recommendation While we will explore this topic in somewhat greater detail elsewhere in the handbook it is important to keep a few things in mind where letters of recommendation are concerned. First, in a vast majority of cases a letter of recommendation is not going to compensate for a weak application. All too often

applicants believe that a letter of recommendation from someone who is "important" is more valuable than one from someone that does not have the same name recognition. Letters of recommendation support an application; they do not carry the applicant. One would do well to get letters of recommendation from those who can speak directly to your intellectual capacities, personality traits, and weaknesses and strengths as both a student and an individual, rather than for "big names" who don't know you as well.

To help facilitate the LOR process you will find a form in appendix C.

Personal Statement Applicants need to keep in mind that their personal statement will probably be their only chance to speak directly to the admissions committee and give them an opportunity to see the applicant as more than their LSAT score or their GPA. Having said this I can tell you that many applicants fail to effectively give the admissions committee any sense of who they are or why they should be accepted to their law school. We will go into personal statements in greater detail later. For now, it is important to recognize that your personal statement is the only part of the application where the committee gets to hear your distinct voice.

Early Decision Applying for early decision to a school tells the school that they are your first choice and if offered admittance to their Law school, you will accept. While applying for early decision will not make your application a certainty, it will help.

So while your GPA and LSAT score may decide who makes the first cut they are by no means the only determining factor in whether or not a student is accepted.

Choosing the right law school, or more appropriately having it choose you, is an important part of your overall strategy. What is key is being realistic about which law schools would most likely be interested in you. In a moment we will look at other determining factors in your decision about which Law schools to consider. However, regardless of these other factors, you should keep in mind that you want to choose law schools whose criteria you either meet or are close enough to meeting, meaning that you have a reasonable expectation of being seriously considered by that school.

The key in determining which law schools to apply to is matching your GPA and LSAT score, with a school's median requirement. To aid in this process you should get an accurate GPA by consulting LSAC's grade conversion table, which you will find at

www.lsat.org/applying/academic-record.asp. The next question you

have to ask yourself is, given the realities of your GPA and LSAT score, is your application strong enough to overcome any weaknesses embodied in those two important numbers. If there is one area where students seem to deceive themselves more than others, it is in their belief that they are somehow unique, and that who they are, and their path to the present more than compensate for a weak academic performance and a poor LSAT score. The most important consideration in determining which Law schools to apply to is to make an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses, and then to be realistic in understanding how these will be viewed by the admissions committee of the schools where you wish to apply.

Assuming that you can honestly assess yourself, what other things should you consider when choosing law schools? Here is a list of several factors you need to consider:

Cost Unless money is not an issue, you are going to have to consider which Law schools you can afford to attend. Obviously a factor in this decision will be the likelihood of receiving financial aid, grants, or scholarships.

Geographic Location Here again you need to be honest with yourself. While the thought of being in a rural setting may at first be appealing to

you really need to about, is what a rural setting is like. If it's important to you that you have activity going on around, you then a rural setting may be problematic. Choosing a school because you just want to leave the part of the country where you grew up requires you to think more deeply about what it is about where you are that you want to change. Making such a decision also requires that you have explored other areas by visiting them to get a first-hand and realistic understanding of what it would be like to attend law school in such a place.

Type of Law You Hope to Practice Not all law schools are equally strong in every area of the law. While you may think you are absolutely certain about the type of law you wish to practice when you pass the Bar, it is possible that you change your mind in law school. One of the most valuable experiences law schools offer is exposure to many different areas of law. It is not uncommon for students to enter law school with a strong interest in a particular area of the law and leave with a desire to practice in a very different area of the law. So you need to be absolutely clear in your own mind whether or not a particular area of the law is going to be a major determining factor in deciding which law schools to apply to.

Practical Considerations There are any number of practical concerns student should address when considering which law schools to apply to.

While the various concerns around choosing where to apply to law school are too numerous to discuss here in detail, and vary from individual to individual, there are a couple of concerns that should be appropriately weighed by everyone.

GPA and the LSAT

There is no getting around the importance of your GPA and especially your LSAT score. These two numbers are the first thing most law schools will look at when they receive an application. Although the admissions process differs from school to school, generally law schools take your GPA and LSAT score and create your ‘index’ number. They arrive at this number by taking a weighted combination of your GPA and LSAT score. How the two are weighted is determined by each school. However, they almost always weight the LSAT more.

There are three reasons why law schools create such an index and then use it at the start of the process to separate students that they might want to accept from those they might want to reject. First, given the tremendous number of applications most schools receive and their need to review all these applications within a limited time frame, schools are forced to make some quick assessments early on in the process. These two numbers facilitate the process by allowing admissions committees to have a reasonable standard for ferreting out weak applications so they

can focus on those applicants that are most likely to be the type of candidate they are looking for.

Second, while they are not perfect indicators by any means, your GPA and LSAT score are about the best indicator of the likelihood of your succeeding in law school.

Third, these two numbers and their subsequent index allow admission committees to compare applicants from different schools, with perhaps different degrees, and with completely different paths to the present.

Once you have been assigned an index number, the committee most likely will place your application in one of three categories (piles) before it is read, and they *will* read it:

Most Likely Accept – If your Index is high enough, that is it falls well above the school’s target or median number because your GPA is excellent and your LSAT score is very high, you will probably be automatically accepted. There are other considerations these admission committees often take into consideration. Nevertheless, if you have a high index it is a good bet that you will be accepted.

Possibly Accept or Reject – This category represents the majority of applicants, because most applicants do not apply to law schools where they have a high probability of being rejected. Applicants in this category have an index number around the schools median or target number. Typically, as they read your application they are weighing several factors. The competitiveness of the school you attended as an undergraduate is important because it helps compare you to other applicants. They will read your personal statement, letters of recommendation, and any other materials you submitted. They will also take into consideration your demographics - where you come from, age, gender, ethnicity, and host of other factors that will help them create a diverse and interesting incoming class. These only represent some of the other factors that they will weigh when considering your application.

Most Likely Reject – If your index is not very strong relative to the school's median or target number you will probably be rejected. When reading such applications they are looking for 'something' that makes them willing to take a risk on you. What they are looking for is something about you that is unique like some impressive accomplishment, work experience, or something that makes you demographically interesting. Nevertheless, the likelihood is not good that you will be accepted if you are in this category.

Waiting Lists - Probably one of the most frustrating outcomes in the law school application process is being ‘wait listed.’ You are not exactly accepted, and you are not exactly rejected. You are in a state of limbo, especially if it is a school you really want to attend. Unfortunately, there is very little you can do but wait. There are of course the waiting list of horror stories, like finding out in early September you have been accepted after having put down a deposit on your second or third choice school, and you are getting ready to move into your new housing.

The wait list exists basically for one reason, to fill seats in the incoming class. Not knowing how many accepted applicants will actually accept their offer to attend, schools keep a waiting list to fill those seats that others vacate. It is not uncommon at all to hear in late August that you have been accepted. So you have to sit tight.

Law schools vary in the way they handle an applicant’s request for information about their wait list status. Typically schools rank their waiting list and many, but not all, will tell you your rank. Others have no ranking and therefore cannot tell you ‘how far down on the list you are.’ So you wait. Calling and asking, can certainly not hurt your chances of getting in. I often recommend to students that are placed on waiting lists that they should send a letter expressing just how much they want to attend that law school and indicating that if offered a seat they will most

certainly accept. It will probably do little to improve your chances but it will probably not hurt your chances either.

Other Factors that May Determine If You Get Accepted

- Extracurricular activities
- Ethnic background
- Work experience
- Community activities
- State that you live in
- Reason for studying law
- Difficulties you overcame
- Past accomplishments

Chapter 6

The Law School Admissions Council (LSAC)

LSAC provides several important services and is arguably the best source of information about applying to, attending, and successfully completing law school. It is an incredible resource, check it out at www.LSAC.org.

First, LSAC designs, administers, and scores the LSAT exam. LSAC has published every test they have administered since the early 1990s. You can buy these tests and use them to prepare for the LSAT.

LSAC administers the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS) for which they charge a fee. This service is well worth the money. First, you need only send them one transcript, one copy of each letter of recommendation, and one copy of your personal statement. LSDAS copies each of these and distributes them to all the schools you applied to.

You can fill out almost all of your law school applications on line, which saves you the trouble of having to enter your personal information over and over again into each application.

Finally, LSDAS gathers all your information together and when your file is complete, it takes care of making certain that your complete

applications arrive at each of the schools that you apply to. It is especially important to get your application complete as soon as possible. Most schools make their decisions on a rolling admission basis and so the sooner you can submit your completed application the better.

LSAC also holds Law School Recruitment Forums several times a year all over the country. Prospective law school students can speak directly with law school representatives, attend workshops, and gather a wealth of information about the law schools they are interested in. Check the LSAC website for a listing of cities and dates.

Chapter 7

Preparing for the LSAT Exam

How you prepare for the LSAT exam is a decision you should make based on what you think will work best for you, a prep class, private tutoring, preparing on your own, preparing with friends, or not preparing at all. I do not suggest the last option.

There are many business that offer LSAT prep classes. Places like Kaplan (conveniently located right on campus), Princeton Review, PowerScore and TestMasters all offer a full line of programs from private tutoring to weekend classes, week long intensive classes and on and on. I suggest you go on line and check out as many prep services as you can. Choosing a prep service is usually a highly personal decision, however, some of the things you should consider in choosing one are:

- Is an experienced instructor teaching the class?
- What is the cost?
- How many hours of instruction are there?
- What is the cost of repeating the class?
- Are there money back guarantees?
- What types of material are used?
- Is on line help available?
- What is the size of the classes?

Chapter 8

Writing Your Personal Statement

Each fall a personal statement writing workshop is offered. Please check the bulletin board outside the pre-law office in the Political Science Department for days and times.

Here are some pointers from a number of people involved in reading law school applications about what to do and what not to do when writing your personal statement:

- Tell your strongest and best story here! The optional essay can go further but this is your one certain shot.
- No grammatical errors! No spelling errors! Do not rely on spellcheck or grammar check. Have others read it.
- Read the application directions carefully.
- The quality and substance of your writing creates a more engaging personal statement. Be sure that your topic and writing style match. For example, serious topics do not lend themselves to a light and breezy writing style.

- Write from the heart – integrity is the key.
- Use the statement to provide additional information, do not repeat what they already know from other sources.
- The structure of your essay is important. Your essay needs to be coherently laid out so there is an easy flow to your prose. It is always best to proceed in a logical manner unless not doing so directly serves the theme of your essay. For example, if you are writing about past influences on present choices going back and forth between these two time periods might help your essay.
- What picture of yourself do you want to draw?
- Be focused and concise.
- Your statement should not be more than two pages in length.
- Make it personal.
- Don't be clever (using gimmicks – like writing a poem or your obituary is a mistake.)

- Think of your personal statement as your interview with the admissions staff.
- Do not write about others that have inspired you etc. This essay is about you, not them. Unless you can tie others in with YOUR statement then it is best to avoid bringing others into an essay that is supposed to be about you.
- This is not an essay on God or the meaning of life!
- Address ‘bad stuff’ (low GPA and LSAT score etc.) In an addendum, not here.
- Your story may seem unique to you (meaning unusual or rare) but it probably isn’t to those who have been reading applications for the past 20 years, therefore, it is always best to get a reality check by asking others about your proposed topic and if it seems unique to them. Chances are if those that know you don’t think the topic is unique, it probably is not.
- Be concrete. Base your essay on verifiable facts and your own experience. You may want to help the huddled masses but unless

you have experienced doing so on some level your goal may seem unrealistic or disingenuous.

- Experiences are supposed to change us – don't describe another person or experience as being important in your life without talking about how it changed you – how you grew from it.
- On study abroad, many people do so. What makes your experience so special? Was there a significant challenge – cultural; language; etc.? No one cares about your summer abroad and the interesting people you met without this connection.
- Topics to avoid: why I want to go to law school; I like to debate; what one hopes to accomplish in law school and after; my family always thought I'd be a great lawyer, etc.

Do's

- Be upbeat and positive.
- Show you have a sense of humor about yourself (I don't mean be humorous – that can fail badly); it portrays maturity.

- Include a resume regardless of whether or not they ask for one. It provides a ready chronology.
- Address your strengths without arrogance and your weaknesses without being defensive.
- Be straightforward, direct and engaging. Make the reader feel you are present when they read your statement.
- Explain what has formed your attitudes and beliefs.
- Don't plagiarize! They'll probably find out.
- At least one, probably two, perhaps three people will read your statement so. This means that you will have a few chances to impress.
- If there is a chance to do an optional essay, do it, but only if you have something additional to say.

Optional essay these come in two flavors: open topic and assigned topic.

Open Topic

(Use it proactively to tell positive stuff about your life) make it link with your personal statement. It's another version of the story of your life. It could further flesh out a topic you could only mention in your personal statement, such as a unique experience or hobby; a great come-from-behind story; a leadership story; personal challenge or a passion for collecting dolls.

Assigned topic

Two typical topics are diversity and disadvantage – these are designed to help law schools identify minority candidates since it is now illegal to use separate LSAT configurations for each.

Chapter 9: Letters of Recommendation

Each fall a workshop on acquiring letters of recommendation is given. Check for dates and times on the pre-law bulletin outside the pre-law advisor's office in the political science department.

Letters from professors are what law schools want. Professors' opinions are unique because they are able to speak in an informed and objective manner about your academic abilities.

Applicants often make the mistake of having someone who is accomplished in some way write a letter of recommendation for them. Law schools are not impressed by such letters for two reasons. First, the recommender's accomplishments are theirs not yours. Second, they usually cannot address what law schools are most interested in, your academic abilities. Law schools are most interested in your ability to do the work, complete the program, and the likelihood you will be a good representative of their school once you are practicing. They want to assess whether you will succeed because your success, or lack of it, is theirs as well.

Another mistake is getting a letter of recommendation from someone you worked for. Once again, all they can offer insight into is what kind of employee you are. Law schools are not very interested in your abilities in the workplace, law schools are concerned about academic abilities.

Chapter 10

Interviews

Law school interviews are rare. That said, if should you find yourself sitting across from someone on the admissions committee, here are some helpful hints.

Know Your Stuff

Much like in a job interview, you want to make sure that you appear to know a great deal about the law school you are interviewing with. This means you should read the school's brochures and familiarize yourself with all the information presented in the brochure as well as on the school's website. Don't ask a question that can be answered by a cursory look at the school's materials. This only tells the interviewer that you were not thorough. That does not play well.

Stay away from the obvious, especially stereotypes about the school. The interviewer is aware of these and your bringing them up makes you appear to be someone who can't take things to the next level.

Don't bore the interviewer. Be engaging by asking questions that are thought out and on target. Try and stay away from questions you think they might have heard a thousand time, or at least approach the question in a new or at least interesting way.

Make certain that you are dressed appropriately and look well groomed. You know what they say about first impressions.

Respect the interviewers time. Don't rush, but don't try to prolong the interview. So what questions should you think about asking in an interview? First, there are some general guidelines:

- Be yourself, it shows you are comfortable and confident in your own skin.
- Do not bring others into the interview with you, this is no place for Mom or your good friend Mike, even if they are sitting outside.
- Do not mention others as an example or comparison. For example do not say, 'my friend Alice didn't think about choosing the right law school before she went to law school, I do not want to make that mistake.' Another example is; "I have a brother and he is a lawyer and I have always been interested in the law, actually more than he." The interview is about you!
- Do not assume the interviewer can or will tell your chances are of getting into their law school. It is always better to ask how you can make yourself more attractive as a candidate.
- Avoid questions that are answered in the school catalogue, it shows you haven't done your homework.

- Ask questions that have more than a one word answer. The truth is that people like to hear themselves talk. The more talking they do the better the interview will have gone from their point of view.
- Always thank them for their time with a smile of appreciation and let them know that they have been informative and have given you a lot to think about.
- Answer any questions they may ask you thoughtfully and take a reasonable amount of time to answer. This accomplishes several things. First, it gives them an opportunity to assess you and also take the focus off them answering questions. During the process of answering it is okay to say “that is an interesting question, I don’t think I have really thought about that enough but I think...”
- Be prepared to answer a question about the other schools you have applied to or what you expect from the law school you attend.
- Always send a follow up letter within a week thanking them for their time and pointing out one or two things they said that have had a real impact on your thinking about law school.
- Never look like there is someplace else you need to get to or you would rather be at that moment.

Some questions you might want to ask are:

- At the end of the interview it is always helpful to ask, “Is there anything you think would be helpful for me to know that I haven’t asked about?”
- “I know that I definitely want to go to law school but I am not sure about what area of law I am best suited. I know your school has a great reputation for business law, and I am very interested in that area of the law. I am curious however, if you have any suggestions about the best way to approach making a decision about what other areas of law might be of interest outside of the exposure you get to different areas of law in class?”
- “I’ve walked around campus and feel very comfortable here. I understand law school is competitive and I like that it is but I am wondering what activities or programs exist to build a sense of community amongst the students?”
- “I know professors are incredibly busy but would you say they generally make themselves available to students, I mean within reason of course?”
- “I am looking forward to a really intellectually rigorous and stimulating experience but I am curious about off campus activities that are available that may also be stimulating?”

- “What qualities would you say are most important for applicants to your law school?”
- Structure a question around a positive and unique experience you had that you feel will help your application but you did not place in your personal statement. What you want to know is if you should have used it but without asking them directly, you don’t want them to feel like they are working on your application for you.

Remember, the interview is about them getting to know you and most importantly getting to like you. You want the added advantage of them remembering you favorably just in case you need an additional edge to get into their school.

Chapter 11

The Application Process and Timetable

It works to your advantage to complete your application early in the process. So here is a suggested schedule for getting things done:

- **January, Junior year.** Get an actual LSAT exam from the LSAC website, print it out and take it under test conditions to determine how much preparation you are going to need.
- **February.** Start preparing for your LSAT. For more information on this topic see chapter 7.
- **March.** Register with LSAC at www.LSAC.org. You will want to follow the directions on the website to register to take the June LSAT exam (you may have to wait to do this if they have not yet opened up registration) and set up your LSDAS (law school data assembly) file. There is a charge that you must pay when you register, if you don't pay within 24 hours of registering your registration will be dropped.
- **April through May.** Assess your LSAT prep progress and keep studying.
- **June.** Take the LSAT and start researching law schools.
- **July.** Continue your research of law schools, and based on your LSAT score, determine if you should take the test again in

September/October. If the answer is yes then start preparing once again. If the answer is no to taking the test again then start working on your personal statement and thinking about who you will ask for letters of recommendation.

- **August.** Continue to prepare for the LSAT if you are taking it again. Get your resume in order, polish up your personal statement and write any addendums you are going to submit. Approach professors and others about writing you a letter of recommendation. Determine which schools you would like to apply to and begin filling out applications on line at LSAC.org. Request paper applications from schools that require paper applications.
- **(Early) September.** Follow up on the letters of recommendation. Finish up your applications and get the college to send your transcript into LSAC.
- **October.** All applications should be in, including early decision applications.
- **November.** Is a fall-back month for October should you run into problems completing any part of the process on time.
- **December.** Breathe.

Chapter 12

How to Prepare for Law School

Here are some suggestions for preparing for law school in the spring of your senior year, if you have time, and over the summer after graduation.

Suggestion #1: Relax. Have fun. Work on your tan. Basically rest up.

Suggestion #2: Find out the texts used in a couple of your first year classes and start reading to get a jump on the work.

Suggestion #3: Do suggestion #2 above and check out Law Preview. They offer a one week intensive course to help prepare you for law school.

Suggestion #4: Do suggestions 2 and 3 above and get a private tutor to help you prepare for one of your first year classes.

Chapter 13

The First-Year Curriculum

Everyone has heard about how difficult the first year of law school is. In case you were out of the room and missed the discussion on the first year of law school watch the movie *The Paper Chase* or read Scott Turow's *One L: The Turbulent True Story of the First Year at Harvard Law School*.

Mostly, the difficulty around law school generally and the first year in particular has much to do with the amount of reading that is required and the fact that learning takes place through active, not passive, means. The two primary methodologies for teaching law are the Socratic Method and the Case Method. With the Socratic Method; you will be expected to participate by answering questions and proactively engaging the process. The Socratic Method is more than just a teaching methodology, it's a heart-pounding, palm-sweating journey through the bowels of your own ignorance. But take comfort, you are not alone. The method involves your being able to summarize a case at a professor's request, and then the professor will explore all the deficits embodied in your response, not by laying them out but rather by 'cross-examining' you.

The Case Method involves, cases, cases and more cases. Students read cases from casebooks that were decided on the appellate or Supreme Court level and try to come to an understanding of the issues and laws relevant to each case and prepare themselves to answer questions on these in class.

Typically, your first year curriculum will cover the following courses (I should note that Yale and a few other schools are moving away from such a structure but it is too early to tell if that is an experimental/temporary move or if they have fully committed themselves to it. I suggest checking with their website periodically):

Civil Procedure (“Civ Pro”) is all about what goes on in civil, not criminal, court. It covers the rules that govern important civil matters such as who can sue and whom they may sue, and the attendant why, when and where of how one can sue another. The Rules of Civil Procedure cover everything from obtaining information (discovery), pre-trial motions, making your case (pleading) and more. It is important to study the process because the process has a real impact on the substantive nature of the law.

Constitutional Law (“Con Law”) is the study of the United States Constitution. Con Law is usually separated into two distinct areas and can, and often is, taught as two separate courses. The first area

covers the structure of the government, and the relationship between the States and the national government. The second explores the area of individual rights.

Contracts After a couple of semesters of contracts what starts off appearing to be reasonably a straightforward structure for creating a contractual obligation between two or more parties turns into a virtually limitless variety of complicated conditions governing the fulfillment of obligations between mutually agreeable parties. Past cases are used to shepherd the unsuspecting law student through the maze of mostly unwritten law that governs these relationships.

Criminal Law Now this is fun. Where else can you conjure up such hypothetical scenarios as “If you throw an already dead person off of a roof believing they are alive with the intention of killing them does this constitute murder?” How about, “A person is slipped a drug that makes them incapable of checking their emotions and ends up assaulting someone. Is the person responsible for their actions?” Now you know why there are so many television shows about criminal law and criminal activity and so few about contract law. Can you imagine an episode of a contract law show? Two lawyers arguing for 60 minutes over

whether the use of the word ‘or’ in a contract means either or both!
Hurry, get the popcorn this is going to be a real nail-biter!

Legal Methods is the new, and smallest, kid on the block, a.k.a. Elements of Law, Legal Research and Writing. This course is usually taught by newer faculty and moonlighting lawyers. It covers legal writing and research and will be a welcome break from your normal course load.

Property Life, Liberty and Property! Property gets right to the heart of democracy, the right to directly benefit from our own labors. The ideas and discourse around property define much of what we engage in daily.

Torts are a private or civil wrong or injury and does not include breach of contract issues. Torts fall into three categories: intentional acts that harm another (intentional torts), irresponsible behavior that injures another (negligent torts), and acts that hurt others unintentionally (liability torts). It’s all about civil liability where one does harm to another. Beating someone (battery) and inflicting emotional pain on another (not including matters of the heart!) are examples of the kinds of issues that fall under Torts.

Chapter 14

Frequently Asked Questions

If you have a question that does not appear here and has not been addressed elsewhere in the handbook email me at Carl.bonomo@qc.cuny, and I will do my best to answer your question and if appropriate post your question and my response on the web version of the handbook.

Does My Major Matter?

No. The standard law school admission's office reply goes something like, "We do not require nor expect applicants to have been involved in a pre-law program as undergraduates, but suggest that applicants seek a broad liberal arts education." Most applicants to law school have undergraduate degrees in political science, philosophy, economics and accounting. Does this mean having majored in literature or physics works against you? No, because law schools want a diverse incoming class and so they are not the least put off by your choice of a major. In addition, it turns out that a disproportionate number of students with degrees in the 'hard sciences' do very well in law school.

Does Having a Graduate Degree Help Me?

Law schools are normally unaware of any graduate degrees you might have. Additionally, even if they are aware of your degree your GPA from graduate school will not be factored into your index number. Graduate GPAs are not factored in because the vast majority of law school applicants have only an undergraduate degree. Remember law

school IS a graduate program. So you are going to have to make the law schools you are applying to aware of your graduate work by sending the admissions committee a letter along with your graduate transcript. Will it help? Even though only your undergraduate GPA and degree are considered by law schools, the additional degree and GPA will help if the grades you received in graduate school are better than those you received as an undergraduate. Then it will show that you are capable of doing better than your undergraduate transcript would otherwise indicate. So although it does not change your index number, when they read your file they will take note of both your graduate degree and your GPA from graduate school.

What is Law Review and Why is it Important?

Law review refers to a law school's most prestigious journal, edited by students who have completed their first year. Selection of students for law review is based on grades, a writing competition, or both. Making law review is prestigious and it improves your job opportunities down the road.

How Much Does the LSAT Exam Really Matter?

It is probably the single most important factor law schools consider when reviewing your application. Given that it takes students on average four years and about 1,800 hours of sitting in class and countless hours

outside class studying, reading and writing to get their GPA, and it only takes about 4 hours to get their LSAT score, it does seem unfair for law schools to give greater weight to the LSAT. We have already mentioned why they do this but that does not change the fundamental unfairness of the system.

Does It Matter Which LSAT Exam I take?

Most students take the June or October tests. The one consideration I hear over and over from students about which of these two tests to take is how they want to spend their summer. Some students want to enjoy their summer and so they want the test out of the way in June. Others want the summer to prepare for the test and so they take the October test. Taking either test works for applying to law schools in the fall for the following fall incoming law class. Neither the June nor the October tests rule out early decision and both provide ample time to get your application together for consideration.

However, there are a few strategic advantages to taking the June exam. The June exam allows you to spend your summer preparing for law school, working on your personal statement, filling out applications, getting your resume together and getting your letters of recommendation lined up. While you can still do all of this and take the September/October test you will also have to be preparing for the LSAT exam. Typically it is best to focus on preparing for the exam exclusively.

Does this mean you cannot do everything at once? No, but it may be easier to spread things out.

The December test typically rules out any likelihood of being considered for early decision, especially for the more highly ranked schools, but not necessarily for other schools. The February test is usually too late for most schools to consider your application for that fall. You should call the schools you are interested in or check their websites to find out if they accept the February test. You should keep in mind however that many schools accept students on a rolling admissions basis and so seats are being filled on an ongoing basis from the early Fall and so the later you get into the process the fewer available seats there are.

I hear some LSATs are easier than others?

This question is probably the most frequently asked by students. The answer is NO! Given the importance and the nature of the LSAT it is understandable that students are looking to give themselves every possible advantage. The truth is that the LSAT is a standardized test so even if one exam were ‘easier’ than another you would need to get more questions right to get the same score as someone taking a slightly more difficult exam. Keep in mind the degree of difficulty between these exams is very small.

What do I do if my LSAT score is not very good?

If your LSAT score is not going to get you seriously considered by the schools you had hoped to attend, you need to assess the likelihood of improving your score if you take the test again. If you think you can improve your score, take the test again but only after putting together and executing a workable study plan. You do not need two bad LSAT scores.

How important is it that I attend a top law school?

Attending a top law school is never going to be a bad thing. The question is how will it impact your future if you cannot make it into one of the top 10 law schools? The answer is that it depends. Graduates from the best law schools will get more interviews and consideration from the big law firms than a graduate from a fourth tier law school. So in terms of interviews graduates of the top 10 will do better. But, if you check out the statistics in chapter 2, 72.9% of all practicing lawyers are in small firms or in private practice. So, if you plan on being one of this 72.9% then going to the best law school matters less. In the end, success as a practicing lawyer is measured in many different ways. If you want to work for a big law firm and someday make partner and make a lot of money then it will probably be better to attend a top law school. One more thing: many schools not in the top 10 have their graduates do very

well financially even in the big city law firms. A good local example of this are graduates practicing corporate law from Brooklyn Law School.

How many times can I take the LSAT?

You can take the LSAT three (3) times in a two year period. It is always best to check the LSAC website to make certain policies have not changed before you make any decisions about taking the LSAT.

How long does an LSAT score stay on my record?

All LSAT scores stay on your record for 5 years. Again, it is always best to check the LSAC website for any changes in policy before you make any decisions.

Does it hurt my chances of getting into law school if I take the test multiple times?

It is hard to say what weight, if any, a particular law school will give to someone who has taken the LSAT two or three times. The official word is that LSAC reports all scores as well as the average of all scores to all the law schools you have applied to. Typically, students tend to score pretty consistently on the LSAT exams they take. Therefore, it is best to avoid all this uncertainty. Take the test once and try to do your best.

More often than not law schools tell applicants they either take the average or take only the highest score. It seems only logical, and again this is complete conjecture, that law schools would make their decision based on how deep their applicant pool is. If the pool is smaller than they would like, and taking the highest score increases their pool of prospective applicants, and the lower score does not, taking the high score would make sense. If their applicant pool is deep, then they may take the lower score or the average. At the end of the day law schools are a business, and as such they are subject to the same market forces of supply and demand as are all businesses, and that they will respond accordingly.

Appendix A

Law School Resources

There are a great many books, articles, and websites that went into writing and compiling this handbook. Listed below are some of the materials I think you will find useful should you decide to go beyond this handbook. I have added the ISBN for each publication where applicable to facilitate your finding the right publication.

ABA LSAC Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools. Law School Admissions Council. ISBN: 978-0-9793050

Here you will find useful information about preparing for law school, LSAT, admission requirements, tuition and expenses, financial aid, curriculum, faculty, career placement, bar passage rates and websites.

How to Get Into the Top Law Schools. Richard Montauk, J.D.
Prentice Hall Press. ISBN:0-7352-0101-3.

Best 170 Law Schools. Eric Owens. Random House. ISBN: 978-0-375-76628-2.

The Insider's Guide to Your First Year of Law School: A Student-to-Student Handbook from a Law School Survivor. Justin Spizman, J.D. Adams Media. ISBN: 978-1-59869-084-2.

Peterson's Perfect Personal Statements. Mark Alan Stewart. Peterson Publishing. ISBN: 978-0-7689-1715-4.

Great Personal Statements for Law School. Paul Bodine. McGraw-Hill. ISBN: 0-07-145300-8.

Perfect Phrases for Law School Acceptance. Paul Bodine. McGraw-Hill. ISBN: 978-0-07-159822-4.

Essays That Worked for Law Schools. Ed. Boykin Curry. Fawcett Columbine. ISBN: 0-449-905152. (This is an older publication and so it may be difficult to find but it is worth a try.)

Law School Confidential (Revised Edition): A Complete Guide to the Law School Experience: By Students, for Students. Robert H. Miller. St Martins. ISBN: 0-312-31881-2

How to Get Into Law School. Susan Estrich. Riverhead Books. ISBN: 1-59448-035-4

Getting to Maybe: How to Excel on Law School Exams. Jeremy Paul and Michael Fischl

[www.lawpreview](http://www.lawpreview.com) offers intensive week-long programs to prepare students for law school.

www.lawbooksforless.com offers casebooks and legal study aids.

www.aspenpublishers.com offers study aids and review books for various law school courses.

Websites that contain a great deal of information about law schools and legal careers:

www.findlaw.com

www.ilrg.com

www.hg.org/students.html

www.jurist.law.pitt.edu

Appendix B
Important (or at least interesting) Data

This section will be available in Summer 2010