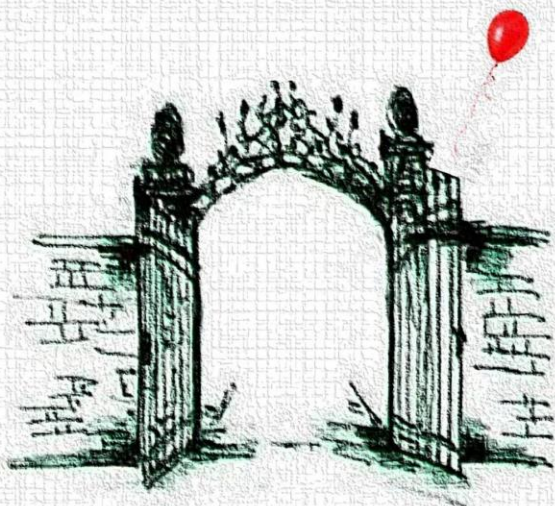


# MASTER THE MODERN ADMISSIONS PROCESS (LAW SCHOOL EDITION)

THE ULTIMATE LAW SCHOOL ADMISSIONS  
STRATEGY MANUAL



DARRELL BENNETT

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Alumnus of Harvard Law School & Morehouse College

**MASTER THE MODERN**  
**ADMISSIONS PROCESS**

*THE ULTIMATE LAW SCHOOL  
ADMISSIONS STRATEGY GUIDE*

DARRELL J. BENNETT, J.D.

**Also by Darrell Bennett**

*Come. Back. Swinging.*

*Leadership as Self-Discovery*

*Daring to be Different: 25 Tips for a Life of  
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PROCESS:

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ADMISSIONS STRATEGY GUIDE

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Darrell is an inspirational speaker, Harvard-educated CEO, founder of The B-Squared Global Group, and creator of the mentorship gaming app, Journy™. He is also a three-time published author and the owner of the global trademark rights for Come. Back. Swinging.®, which is the title of his most recent book and the international motivational community he created.

Darrell was born in Baltimore, Maryland at 4:44 am on 8.5.1985. As a young boy, he made the irrevocable decision to dedicate his life in service to the LORD.

Darrell graduated from Morehouse College in 2007 as Valedictorian and from

Harvard Law School in 2010 as Class Marshal. He published his first book, *Daring to Be Different*, at 18 years old and founded his first company at 24.

In 2020, he chronicled his coming-of-age journey in his memoirs, *Come. Back. Swinging.*, and has used his lived experience overcoming personal challenges to create a motivational community that helps people come back from the brink and overcome their hardest moments.

Today, Darrell lives in New York City, has spoken in over a dozen nations on three continents, and is on a personal mission to empower one billion souls during his lifetime.

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## INTRODUCTION

If I got a dollar for every time I was asked, “*How did you get into Harvard Law School?*”, I would have already paid off my student loans. In fact, I got so used to being asked this question that I wrote this manual to be a sort of ‘one-stop shop’ for all applicants inquiring about the process.

As an attorney and college professor, I am invited to universities and pre-law forums all around the nation to teach others how to navigate the law school admissions process.

Do not be fooled: the rubric for success has changed in this market. What worked in the 80’s and 90’s just won’t cut it anymore. **Unlike most other admissions counselors, I was in your shoes only a**

**few years ago and I know what it takes now to get into the best law schools.**

Just to give you an idea of the numbers: nowadays, a ‘top ten’ law school receives about **15 applications for each spot in its first-year class.** And that’s just ‘top ten’ schools—let alone the Ivy League.

The most selective schools have no choice but to "look beyond the numbers," as admissions folks are fond of saying. This means that hundreds of applicants with near-perfect LSAT scores and law school grades will get turned away from the top schools.

**In 2010 alone, about 40 percent of all applicants to law school were not able to go to *any* law school at all because they were not admitted anywhere.** That means that 4 in every 10 applicants didn’t get accepted into any law school at all.

I had suspected it before, but now after having matriculated I am convinced: the people who attend the most prestigious law schools are not smarter or more gifted or even more connected than everyone else, they are better prepared for the admissions process. It's true: knowledge really is power.

Particularly now in an economy where prestige and brand-recognition mean more than currency itself, people are doing all kinds of things to get into the best law schools.

I went from living in a trailer park to living my dream at Harvard Law School. These are the tips and strategies that I used to get accepted into a range of America's top law schools (and get scholarships to many of them)—and how you can too...

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PART I

**UNDERSTANDING THE ADMISSIONS**  
**PROCESS**

CHAPTER 1

**WHY LAW SCHOOL ADMISSIONS IS**  
**MUCH MORE CHALLENGING THAN**  
**COLLEGE**

If the college admissions game is a challenge, then the law school admissions game is a beast! From the LSAT—which made the SAT seem like fun—to the weeks of meticulously combing through my personal statement, everything about the law school admissions process reminded me that I was in a whole new ball game. Whenever I got frustrated—and, trust me, there were many times—I would remember that timeless line from *The Wizard of Oz*: “We are not in Kansas anymore.”



The law school admissions process is much more challenging than college partly because there are much fewer spots in comparison to the number of applicants and partly because there is so much misinformation out there.

The bar is also much higher for a graduate school student candidate than it is for a college hopeful. In high school, you are expected to be uncertain; it is a time when others anticipate for (and even encourage) you to find yourself. By college, on the other hand, you are expected to have already found yourself. College admissions committees are far more forgiving of lackluster performance in high school than graduate school admissions committees are of it in college.

Unlike other graduate degrees, you can only get 1 Juris Doctor (J.D.), which makes law school even more selective than it would normally be.

Moreover and perhaps most importantly, what you should know about law school that distinguishes it from virtually every other type graduate school (and makes it such a difficult field to break into) is that law holds a special place in the historic fabric of America. People from law school go on to run multi-billion enterprises, lead armies and govern the country itself.

This is important for you to know because you can better place yourself within that “fabric,” as it were, in your personal statement and other parts of your application. Remember your application is all about showing you and your importance to their (admissions committees’) bigger picture.

Bottom line: law school admissions is much less about whether you are a driven, well-intentioned person (as is college admissions) and more about whether you have the skills and capabilities necessary to be successful in the modern economy.

CHAPTER 2

**BE DIFFERENT!**

As quiet as it is kept, the secret to getting into the law school of your dreams starts with you being you. Distinguishing your application from the pack is critical. When you put your application together, keep this one primary question in mind: How many other people can say the same thing?

Your application should be uniquely you. Your essays, recommendations and extracurricular activities should all tie in together to tell a story that only you can tell. For instance, I always tell my clients that if I can switch their name on their

personal statement with another one of my client's and it still fits, then that means it's not unique enough.

Bottom line: The more people who can say what you say, the less impressive it is.

Think about it like this: your chances of success in the admissions process are directly proportional to the number of people whose application is similar to yours. If your application sounds like more of the same, how can you expect it to stand out?!

**Numbers help, but that will only get your application on the table.** Every year, there are many applicants with near perfect grades and LSAT scores that get rejected from the more selective law schools.

The fact of the matter is that universities are looking to fill their classrooms with a

diversity of perspectives. Your application should demonstrate to the admissions committee that you bring a viewpoint that no one else does.

**Use every aspect of your application to give the reader some insight into your unique character.** Don't be afraid to show some flair. At the end of the day, admissions officials are people too, and they respond to a personal touch.

I elaborate on how to find what makes you unique and how to capitalize on it in my book, *Daring to be Different: 25 Tips for a Life of Success*.

CHAPTER 3

**IT'S ALL ABOUT VALUE-ADD**

One of the biggest mistakes I have seen applicants make is putting their application together with the notion that admissions committees are accepting people because of what they did in the past. That is definitely not the case. Any member of any admissions committees will tell you that their focus is on the future.

Admissions committees accept applicants because of the potential value they can add to their institution and to the world in the future: they only look to the past (i.e.

college grades, LSAT scores, recommendations) as indicators.

In other words, admissions committees don't make a decision on an applicant based on what he/she has done in the past, but rather on what he/she will do in the future.

At the end of the day, it's all about value-add.

Admissions committees are mostly interested in the value you can add to their law school and to the world with their degree. The ultimate goal of the admissions process is for your entire application to show the specific, unique value that you and only you can bring. From your extracurricular activities to your recommendations to your personal statement, every aspect of your application should be a glowing reminder of your potential value-add.

**Ultimately, the goal of every admissions committees is to accept those applicants that they feel will bring the most value to their institution.** It is not just about whether they ‘like’ a person or not; they are making decisions based on value!

Use your application to market yourself, your relevant experiences and your strengths to the admissions committee. Be specific! Give specific experiences that emphasize your strengths and specific skill-sets that you possess that would make you an ideal candidate. When the committee finishes reading your application, you want them to say: “Wow! If this is what he’s done thus far, imagine what he will do with our law degree!”

But be careful: there is a thin line between marketing yourself and over-sharing (TMI!). Stay professional. Your application should be an appeal to the interests of your audience, not to their sympathy.



At the same time, don't shy away from sharing your struggles either. You are not here despite the challenges in your life: you are here *because* of them. Use your pain to show your purpose.

I know this is a tricky-dance—knowing what (and how much) to share to show your value *and* doing it in the right way.

It's not as much about what you share as much as how you share your story. I have seen this happen so many times. Two applicants can share similar experiences, but have two totally different reactions based on their tones and what aspects they choose to emphasize.

I advise my clients to keep a tone of firm confidence and patient optimism throughout their application. Don't be boastful, but don't play the "woe-is-me" song either.

Remember the goal: the whole purpose of you sharing your experiences, in the first place, is for the admissions committee to see your strengths and your character through the backdrop of the significant events in your life.

Use your experiences—successes and failures alike—as colors on a canvas to paint a portrait of who you have become and who you intend to be.

Ultimately, focus of your application should not be on the struggles you've been through (or even on the high times of your life), but rather on the lessons you've learned along the way.

CHAPTER 4

**DON'T DISCOUNT THE POWER OF**  
**POSITIVITY**

The law school admissions process is taxing enough on its own: don't let negativity sabotage your efforts. Ironically, the way you think about the process is one of the biggest indicators of how you will fare. Henry Ford once said: "Whether you believe you can or you cannot, either way you are right." This has never been more true for law school admissions.

Of course, mindset is only one component, but it is nonetheless a crucial factor in the success of your application. You have to

be mentally prepared for the entire process (from the weeks and weeks of practicing for the LSAT to the months of waiting for the decision of the admissions committee). Particularly now, in our media-driven society, you have to make the conscious decision to remain confident in yourself—and not to be swayed by the constant barrage of reports, statistics and “experts” who tell you your goals are unattainable.

You have to be your own cheerleader. Having the 2 P’s throughout your entire admissions process is critical: positivity and patience.

People who apply and have a defeatist attitude are doing themselves a huge disservice. Saying things like, “I’m sure I won’t get in” or “I know this is a long-shot” will never help your cause.

**The very first step to getting accepted into the law school of your choice is**

**getting accepted in your mind first.**

You have to believe you are good enough to get in. You have to know that you are indeed worthy. You are worthy to live your dreams and to be what you were meant to be.

See yourself attending the law school before you ever submit an application. See yourself physically there, taking classes. See your graduating with your J.D.. See it as already done.

This reminds me of a chapter in Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, "Begin with the End in Mind." **You can't expect an admissions committee to see the best in you if you don't see it in yourself first.**

I like how the former dean of admissions for Georgetown Law put it: "The first tip I would give is to really take ownership and understand that how you apply makes a

DARRELL J. BENNETT

big difference in whether or not you're going to get in.”

CHAPTER 5

**THE \$\$\$ QUESTION:**

**HOW TO PAY FOR LAW SCHOOL**

It really bothers me that so many people self-select out of applying to certain law schools (or don't apply at all) simply because they do not think they can afford it. Trust me: I know what it is like to be there. Growing up, I knew my family could not afford to send me to college (let alone to law school). **But I also knew that as long as I excelled, money would never limit my academic goals.** And it never did.

I received a full tuition, room and board scholarship to college. I had half of my

law school education paid for by grants and the other half through a very generous loan package.

In fact, I had schools calling *me*. I had two big-name law schools offer me more money on top of the scholarships they already had offered, just so I would choose them. Another institution had their dean of admissions call me personally to offer a full tuition, room and board scholarship.

Bottom line: the money is out there—even in this economy—and when you embody excellence, somebody will pay for you.

Although there might not be as many outside private scholarships and fellowships for law school as there are for college, there are still hundreds of them. And most of them award much more than college scholarships generally do, which is definitely a plus.



Also many law schools offer grants to students who have financial need. Grants, like scholarships are free money (the main difference is that grants are generally need-based, whereas scholarships tend to be merit-based).

Moreover, in many cases, when you apply to a particular law school, you are also automatically considered for whatever scholarships and grants that school offers. So give yourself a chance and, at least, apply. Like Dr. King would often say: “You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step in faith.”

If you fall under any of these categories, you are a great candidate for scholarships for law school:

- children of immigrants
- family has a military background
- possess a unusual skill
- ability to play an instrument or sport
- left-handed
- have lived and/or studied abroad
- commitment to a career in public service/non-profit work

CHAPTER 6

**THE BREAK-DOWN**

## **The Qualities of an Ideal Candidate**

According to a recent survey of admissions officials at law schools across the nation, the seven qualities that law school admissions officials report most frequently that they look for in an ideal candidate are:

Motivation

Perseverance

Resourcefulness

Creativity

Initiative

Resilience

Self-Discipline



**The Skills and Experiences of an  
Ideal Candidate**

The skills and experiences that law school admissions officials report most frequently that they look for in an ideal candidate are:

Research Skills

Writing Skills

Analytical Skills

*(Demonstrates your ability to succeed in  
law school)*

International Experience

Distinctive Cultural Background

Unique Life Experiences

Unusual Hobbies/Skills

*(Demonstrates your ability to succeed after  
law school)*

## **The Application**

The primary factors that comprise the law school application are:

GPA

LSAT score(s)

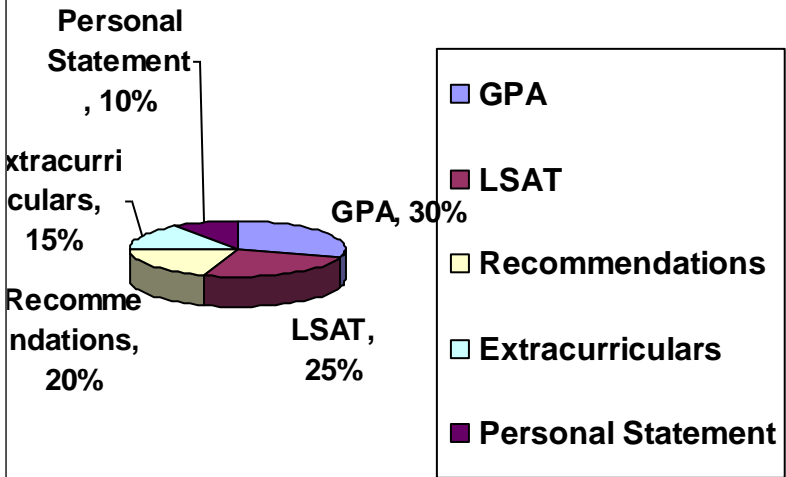
Recommendations

Extracurricular Activities

Personal Statement



**The 'Whole Person' Pie**



## **The Goal**

The goal is to use every aspect of your application to demonstrate your strengths and to highlight in your experiences the qualities and skills that law school admissions committees are looking for in an ideal candidate.

PART II

**COMPONENTS OF THE LAW**  
**SCHOOL APPLICATION**

CHAPTER 7

**GPA**

The inconvenient truth is that your grade point average (GPA) is probably the single most important factor in the law school admissions process. Your GPA is so important partly because it is the only consistency among all applicants: every law school applicant will have to submit some sort of academic record (from both college and law school) to be evaluated.

Furthermore, because your GPA speaks to your academic performance over a span of several years, admissions committees feel comfortable putting more weight on it

than a standardized test that you would take in one sitting.

But your GPA is bigger than just the number itself. Because admissions committees understand that every college has its own computing system (some on a 5.0 or 6.0 scale while others on the more commonly-used 4.0 scale), **they look to other factors like your rank in your class and intensity of your course curriculum.**

Moreover, improvement counts for something. The applicant who shows substantial improvement is always going to fare better than the student with the consistently mediocre grades. Admissions committees want to see effort.

**Bottom line: The better your grades, the better your chances.** But, at the end of the day, it's still all *chances*: not even a perfect 4.0 GPA can guarantee admission (as evidenced by the dozens of applicants

with near perfect GPAs *and* LSAT scores who get turned away from the most selective law schools each year).

**It's Not Over Till It's Over: Make Every Semester Count**

You can't change the past, but every semester is a new opportunity for improvement. **Don't use your past performance as an excuse to keep doing more of the same.**

Admissions committees are very willing to forgive freshman year issues or one 'off' semester. But you cannot make the argument that one semester or year was an academic anomaly, if all of your grades stay more or less the same.

**Aim High!**

Set your bar high. Remember you are competing against tens of thousands of candidates across the nation (and thousands more around the world who are interested in American law schools), not just your immediate peers. Being the best in your school or in your city just isn't good enough: you have to be among the best in the world.

Les Brown, a world-renown speaker and author, said it best: "People don't fail because they aim too high and miss, but because they aim too low and hit." Aim to be the best every time you do something.

Strive to get the best grades you can—each and every semester. Regardless of what your grades *were* or how difficult other students say a particular class is going to be, put your best foot forward with each new semester.

## **Three Guaranteed Ways to Get Better Grades**

I also give seminars at high schools and college across the nation on how students can get better grades in school (these are some of the same tips that helped me to graduate from college as valedictorian).

The following tips are guaranteed ways to boost your GPA and to start getting better grades now:

- Complete major assignments one week prior to the due date.
- Ask your professor for comments on major papers before you submit them.
- Participate at least 1 time each class period (even if it's just a question).



## CHAPTER 8

### **THE LSAT**

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is a half-day, standardized test administered four times each year at designated testing centers throughout the world. All American Bar Association (ABA)-approved law schools require applicants to take the LSAT as part of their admission process. Unlike in college where, you can choose to take the SAT or ACT, for law school you must take the LSAT.

I get more questions about the LSAT than I do on any other element of the admissions process. The main question of course is: “What is the score someone

needs to get into Harvard Law?” And each time I repeat my answer, it is met with the same look of skepticism; **There is not one LSAT score that is guaranteed to get you into Harvard.** I am not trying to be difficult or let people down easy. It is true: there is no magic score or ‘cut-off,’ as it were. (In fact, both Harvard and Yale turn down at least one applicant with a perfect 180 each year; therefore, clearly there is no score that will *guarantee* admission.)

In 2010, the national average was 152.  
That should be your baseline.

Despite the historical importance of the LSAT, in recent years admissions committees are putting less weight on it than previously (in an effort to adopt a more ‘whole person’ evaluation).

**You have to beat the LSAT in your mind before you can beat it on paper.** Some people defeat themselves before they even sit down to take the test.

The LSATs are important, but it's not as dire as some people make it out to be. Although the SAT might be the most important test you have ever taken, it is still only a test. And just like any other test you have ever taken, you can prepare for it.

## **Start Early**

If I were a betting man, I would always bet my money on the person who starts preparing for the LSAT earlier.

The LSAT is a skills-based test and not a knowledge-based test. So, you are not advantaged by waiting later in your collegiate career (or afterwards) to take it; in fact, you might be disadvantaged.

Plan to take the LSAT by your senior year. Trust me: you will have too many other things on your plate by then to give it the attention it deserves. (Besides, many law schools require that the LSAT be taken by December for admission the following fall).

You can take the LSAT at any time. I recommend that you begin preparing to take it as soon as you are pretty certain about attending law school. Even if you

know you want to take time off between college and law school, I would still recommend taking the LSAT while you are still in college.

You want to take the LSAT when you are at your sharpest (analytically and academically).

Take a practice test to gauge where you are—don't wait to take the actual real test. I have to repeat this because I see so many highly-qualified applicants make this mistake: Do not wait to take the real test to gauge where you are. The LSAT is not the SAT. You want this to be a one-hitter quitter.

### **Practice, Practice, Practice**

Sure, there are strategies that can help you navigate the minefield that is the LSAT more effectively, but the best way is good ole' fashion practice.

I know I said this before, but I have to reiterate: do not go into the LSAT blindly. If the first time you take a full test is when you are sitting for the actual one, you are at a huge disadvantage—I don't care how clever you might think you are.

It is imperative that you begin practicing as soon as you are pretty certain you want to attend law school. Do not wait until your senior year just for the sake of waiting, thinking you 'have time.' Do not wait until you take a certain class, thinking they are going to teach you some shortcut or special strategy.

No matter how low you think your initial score is, you will be benefited by knowing it earlier and being proactive about it: to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

I spent more than 15 months practicing for the LSAT. So I know first-hand the value of practice.

I don't think anyone is *born* a 'good test-taker'—if there is even such a thing. Granted, some people are more inclined to do better on standardized tests. But almost no one was born with these skills. Rather, they are acquired and refined (e.g., through childhood games or the experiences one was exposed to in their upbringing).

Bottom line: you can be as good as anyone else on the LSAT, the only question is how much work are you willing to devote.

Get the books that have real, actual old LSATs, and start doing them, over and over again. Remember Oscar-winning actor (Michael Caine's) words, "Rehearsal is the work, performance is the relaxation."

Stage a dress rehearsal. Duplicate real-time testing conditions. Don't take the practice test at home in a quiet, solitary space; instead go somewhere so that you can practice with distractions (like a Starbucks or a local bookstore).

### **Have a plan and commit to it**

Write down your target score before you even begin practicing in earnest. Keep that number close to you throughout your practicing regiment.

Students who have a clearer vision of what they want out of life are much more likely to achieve it. Write your vision, make it plain.

Plan how much you intend to practice per week. In the three months leading up to the LSAT, you should be practicing at least 4 times per week (that is at least 1 entire LSAT per week). Aim to have taken



20 full tests by the time you sit for the real one.

Remember Confucius' words: "When your goals seem unrealistic, don't scale down your dreams, step up your effort."

Use all of the resources available to you. The \$1000+ score booster classes are great—or so I have been told—but if you were like me and could not afford that, you have to be more proactive. Today, many college and universities provide access to low-cost LSAT prep courses and also offer them as electives. Some community-based organizations now have prep programs as well. The Internet also has a wealth of information on LSAT preparation and many practice tests as well.

**Don't Make the Mistake I Made!**

Plan to take the LSAT when you know will have the most free time. Although it sounds so simple, many students don't. I made this mistake myself. The first time I took the LSAT, it was the morning after our Junior Class Pageant—and I was class president. I can still remember me leaving the nightclub early from the after party mere hours before the test and thinking to myself, “this is going to be bad.” And sure enough it was. Learn from me: don't do what I did.

## **Do your absolute best**

I advise all of my clients that you should determine where you want to attend law school (and make up in your mind that you will apply), before you ever get your LSAT scores.

Do not choose where to apply based on your LSAT scores. People who pick the schools they will apply to based on their scores generally do not fare as well as those who had decided it before they ever began the process.

This is precisely why it is imperative you do your absolute best on the LSAT. Only you really know if you really did your best. As ironic as it might sound, when you know that you put your best effort into the LSAT, you gain the confidence that is necessary to move forward and master this process—regardless what your actual score might be.

DARRELL J. BENNETT

## **On whether to retake it or not...**

The only thing worse than going through the LSAT is going through the LSAT again.

If you are wondering whether you should retake it, ask yourself 3 questions:

- Did something happen during the first test that significantly diminished your performance?
- How likely it is that you will improve your score the next time around?
- Did you score significantly lower than you had on practice tests?

Bottom line: If you have to ask yourself at all, most likely you need to retake it. I mean let's be honest, if you knocked it out of the park, you would not even consider retaking it.

The problem is that most people do not want to put in the effort necessary to re-

take it; so they make up some excuse as to why they won't or can't retake it (some say things like, "if it's meant to be, then it'll be").

I actually re-took the LSAT myself, so I know the feeling. I advise my clients the same thing my mentor advised me when I was in that position (although I definitely did not want to hear it then): You can only get one J.D.. In life. Will you be able to say for the rest of your life that you could live with your score (and, more importantly, the effort you put forward on the exam)?

However, know that the stakes are definitely higher the second time around. Many law schools compare your original test score to your score on subsequent tests, and some take the average or most recent score while requiring disclosure of all scores.

## CHAPTER 9

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

According to the 2011 LSAC survey, most law schools ranked recommendations (particularly professors' recommendations) the most important factor after grade point average and test scores in determining which students they choose for admission.

It is good to say great things about yourself in your application: but it's always better to have someone else say them. Such is the power of the recommendation.

There are 2 primary categories of candidates who are most benefited by a *compelling* recommendation:

Borderline admissible candidates at any law school

Competitive candidates at the most selective law schools

### **Do Your Homework First**

The policies regarding recommendation letters vary from school to school. Read each of your applications carefully to determine (1) how many letters each law school requires and (2) if there are requirements on who should write the letters.

Determine the deadlines so you can plan out which ones take precedence. The rule of thumb is that you want to give your recommenders at least one-month notice.



## **Know Who to Ask and How to Ask**

### **I. Who to Ask**

#### **II.**

Anyone is fair game to be a recommender (anyone who is not related to you): e.g., professors, counselors, coaches, mentors.

Pick at least two professors who can speak thoroughly on your academic record. Even if the school only requires one having two will never hurt. Granted, law schools are interested in your range of abilities and skills, but at the end of the day it's about the academics.

Unlike college, law school admissions committees are asking more concretely of their candidates: Can he/she write well? Is he/she analytical and a calculated thinker? You want your recommendations to highlight these qualities in your background.

**Only ask people who know you well and like you.** It sounds like common-sense, but I see highly-qualified students make this mistake all the time.

Do not ask people to 'recommend' you who do not like you. It does not matter how well they know you: if they are not a fan, don't ask! Your application should be a glowing reflection of you and your potential for success not a mixed bag of reserved praise and mild skepticism.

Do not ask people to recommend you who cannot give specific details about you and your experiences. Sure, it is great to have the mayor of your city write on your behalf, but not if the only thing the mayor can say about you is your name and that you interned with him. Admissions committees will know the difference between a genuine endorsement and some form-letter typed up by the secretary.

Do not push someone to recommend you either. If they are hesitant, then take that as your answer. You would not try to persuade someone to perform surgery on you. The best recommender is someone who truly believes in you and is as enthusiastic about your prospects as you are.

## **II. How to Ask**

Help your recommenders help you. When you ask a person to recommend you, you should provide them with the following information:

- A cover letter (the formal request that includes all of your basic personal information and any relevant application requirements)
- The recommendation form
- Stamped, addressed envelope
- Your resume
- An unofficial transcript

- A copy of your personal statement

If you know you have a certain weakness that is clear in your application, ask your recommenders to address the issue in their letters (for instance, if you scored low on the LSAT but have a high GPA or vice-versa).

Remember this is about marketing yourself. Help your recommenders help you market yourself effectively to the admissions committee.

**The best recommendation letters are those that reiterate the themes and strengths that you already highlighted in your application.**

## **Work Your Connections**

Use your network to get recommendations from key people. Talk to friends, family and alumni who have attended the school of your choice. This is not the time to be shy. Work your connections, and ask for recommendations.

Relationships are everything. **It's not who you know: it's who you get to know.** Make a Networking Plan. (More on this in chapter 16.)

## **LOOK OUT!!**

### **How to Spot a Bad Recommendation Letter!!**

A lesser-known aspect of my consulting services, in helping my clients craft their law school applications, is deciding which recommendation letters to send to schools. I have found that some letters can actually do more harm than good.

Here are the three biggest signs that a recommendation letter is not up to par (and they are much more common in applications submitted by otherwise outstanding candidates than one would think):

- There are no details.
- The writer clearly doesn't know the student personally.
- The letter only discusses material that's evident in the transcript.

## CHAPTER 10

### **EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

Your extracurricular activities include all activities other than your mandatory academic coursework (including jobs/internships and any involvement outside of school).

Participation in extracurricular activities is a must. Admissions committees want to see well-roundedness, particularly when awarding scholarships. I recently read a study in which an admissions dean at a top tier law school offered this hint: “excellence in extracurricular areas receives careful attention. We look for evidence of accomplishment as well as the

depth of commitment and follow-through that lead to significant contributions and recognition from others."

Participation in extracurricular activities is also a win-win. It not only distinguishes and personalizes you to the admissions committee (on a level that numbers simply cannot), but it also helps you to sharpen your talents, meet people, and learn about new things that you might not have otherwise encountered.



## Create a Life-Theme

Pick your extracurricular activities with an overall theme in mind. **Your theme should be closely related to what makes you unique (your gifts).** This is what I call a life-theme.

My life-theme focused on my gift of gab. Throughout high school, I involved myself in activities that primarily involved me using my communication skills (e.g., student government, emceeing engagements, debate clubs).<sup>1</sup>

Someone should be able to look at a list of your activities—without them reading any of your essays—and be able to see where your life is headed.

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<sup>1</sup> I elaborate on recognizing and capitalizing on your own unique qualities much more in my book, [Daring to be Different: 25 Tips for a Life of Success.](#)

By the time you apply to law school, your extracurricular activities should have a commonality: they should tell a story. What is your story? What is your life-theme?

It should not look like you randomly picked activities just for the sake of picking activities. Even if you are just building your resume, don't make it look like that. The best way to get noticed is not by picking the popular activities (or the ones that seem more "prestigious"), but by focusing on what you are already naturally gifted with.

Plan your summers with your overall theme in mind. Each of your summers you should be doing something better and more impressive—and preferably in a different city from either your hometown or school (this is also the key to expanding your network.)

Remember some of the best experience is unpaid (particularly in your college years): don't pass up long money for a quick buck.

### **Stay Committed**

Stay committed! If every year you are involved in totally new activities, it does not speak well of you—and it questions whether you are really 'involved' at all.

Nobody likes the wish-washy person. Admissions committees are looking for consistency in their applicants.

### **Be Master of Something**

Don't be another jack of all trades: be master of something. By your junior and senior years in college, you should be in a leadership role in some organization (even if it is one that you founded).

A professor at Yale said it best:  
**“Unfortunately, nearly all students make the erroneous assumption that participation in more activities is better than fewer...[but] in an increasingly complex world that demands in-depth knowledge and expertise in a chosen field of study, universities are now preferring applicants who choose to be the best at single pursuit.”**

Translation: it's better to be great at one thing than good at several.

*A winner is someone who recognizes his  
God-given talents, works his tail off to  
develop them into skills, and uses these  
skills to accomplish his goals.*

*-Larry Bird*

CHAPTER 11

**PERSONAL STATEMENT**

The not-so-good news: You only have two pages to showcase yourself and explain why you would be an ideal student.

The good news: There is no other component of your law school application that you can control as much as your personal statement.

The great news: If you are willing to devote the time and effort, you can write a personal statement that not only distinguishes your achievements and accomplishments, but that highlights your

strengths and justifies your weaknesses as well.

**Your goal is to use your personal statement to separate you from the sea of candidates with similar academic qualifications.** Everybody applying to the top schools has great grades and great LSAT scores. This is how to rise above the pack.

Every application has a number: your personal statement gives your application a voice and a face.

A law school admissions dean recently gave this advice at a prospective student conference: “As far as your personal statement, work hard on this thing. There seems to be a general perception among applicants that this whole law school admissions process is GPA and LSAT-only driven and that is simply not the case. I read every file that comes in.”

I have even been told by several admissions officers that if they really like a personal statement, they might reconsider that person altogether. “If the numbers are in an acceptable range,” as one particular admissions director put it, “then their personal statement could be the game-changer.”

Your personal statement should answer 3 questions:

Who are you?

Why do you want to attend law school?

Why do you want to attend this particular law school?

### **Think like your target**

Either an admissions committee member or a reader (outside consultants sometimes hired by schools specifically to aid in the admissions process) will be your target audience. Know your target. Appeal to your target!



**Sounding like mostly everyone else will get you the result that mostly everyone else gets.** How many times do you think any given person on the Harvard Law School admissions team has read the words “always been my life-long goal” or “great institution” or “dream school?” Hundreds. Probably thousands. Steer clear of the cliché, and write your personal statement to be distinctive.

As much as possible, think like your target. If you spent hours upon hours each day reading personal statements, what would you find interesting?

**This is your personal movie!**

**Your personal statement should be more a story than anything else.** It should not be a summary of your resume.

As crazy as it might sound, I encourage you to watch your favorite movie before you start writing. Note what you like about it and what makes it such a good movie. Movies are just illustrated stories. So, the same elements that make a good movie will make a good story.

This is your personal movie. Make it an interesting one.

Everything cannot be in your movie. The kitchen-sink approach will not be effective. **Pick what highlights your strengths and what is most important and focus on that.**

You should be the central character of your movie, not mama or anyone else (no matter how much you appreciate them). The other characters can play a role, but **your personal statement should focus on you.**

Your passion should come through the pages. Admissions committees should not be left guessing about your purpose or intentions.

Although applicants choose to write their personal statements in a variety of ways, **three things are consistent among all effective personal statements: a clear theme, an engaging opening, and a conclusion that brings it all home.**

Take these opening lines for example:<sup>2</sup>

- *I only ate snake once.*
- *I am a son of the South.*
- *Growing up in America the son of Indian parents, I never felt truly American or Indian.*

## Stand Out from the Crowd

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<sup>2</sup> I took each of these statements from actual personal statement of previous applicants who were successful in the past.

The same theme that runs through your collegiate career (and beyond if you have graduated) should be clear in your personal statement. For instance, if you love art, are an art history major, and volunteer to teach arts and crafts at the local boys' and girls' club, then this should be an obvious theme in your personal statement.

**At the back of your mind when you are writing your personal statement should be one primary question: How many other people can say the same thing?**

Bottom line: The more people who can say what you say, the less impressive it is.

Your personal statement should never be an appeal for sympathy. And there is such a thing as sharing too much in your personal statement. Stay professional.

## **Highlight Your Strengths**

Compose your personal statement to highlight your strengths and unique abilities.

Use addenda. Include a diversity statement to further distinguish yourself. Remember diversity is not just race and gender, but it now includes a wide variety of other factors; use that to your advantage. Prepare other addenda for any special circumstances: leave no question unanswered. (See chapter 14 for how to make the most of optional addenda.)

**Follow all the directions and make sure there are no typos.** So many highly-qualified students shoot themselves in the foot simply because they make silly, careless mistakes. Remember you only have one time to make a first impression.

Do not write a summary of your resume or transcript, but instead utilize this opportunity to expand upon what is unique about you, your life experiences, and your goals.

Even if it is a good essay, it will not be a good personal statement if it does not tell *your* story.

**Remember you are applying to law  
school**

I read dozens of essays in a month, helping my clients craft them into winning personal statements. Many seem to forget that they are applying to law school—and if they have not forgotten, then their personal statement sure makes it seem like it.

Remember you are applying to *law* school. This is a big difference between the personal statement and what you wrote to

get into college: **you could write a great essay about anything and still appeal to the college admissions committee.**

However, law school admissions committees want to see your interest in law.

Let me be clear: it is OK (and even wise) to bring in unrelated experiences. The key is that you relate it to your interest in law. Remember your personal statement should answer the questions: why law school and why this particular law school?

## **Guaranteed tips to enhance your personal statement**

- **Do not start with a line like, “I was born in [insert year/city].”** You are almost asking for a sigh from your reader—like “here we go again.” Start at an interesting point and bring us back if necessary.
- **Use an adjective to describe every major noun in your statement.** Create a picture in the readers mind. Writing the ‘muggy afternoon’ will always be better than simply the ‘afternoon.’
- **Include a short paragraph that speaks directly to why you should be admitted to that particular law school.** (I elaborate on this further in chapter 15.)



PART III

**THE MODERN TWIST**

DARRELL J. BENNETT

## CHAPTER 12

### **CREATE A COMPELLING RESUME**

Every law school applicant should submit a resume with their application—whether it calls for it or not—especially now. In times before, it wasn't necessary, but with the overwhelming number of students applying to law schools, it has now become more standard than anything.

The resume is your opportunity to highlight your important experiences and activities to the admissions committee. It can't be everything you did: only the experiences that you feel are most important for them to get to know the essence of who you are and your interest/connection with law.

Think about it like this: the more you put, the less is noticed. **When it comes to resumes: less really is more.** I like to make the analogy of when we were kids, drawing pictures and a parent would caution us: “don’t add too much or else it will look ‘too busy.’” The same thing goes for your resume.

The primary goal of the resume is to emphasize your strengths.

Here are some tips for writing a compelling resume:

It should never be more than one page (unless you are including a page for a list of references).

The formatting should leave for ample white space to make the content on the paper eye-catching. The rule is about 20% white space and no more than 80% ink. It

can't be so cluttered that it looks like an essay.

Include your unique skill sets. For example, if you are a certified life-guard or you have climbed a mountain before, put that under its own heading entitled "Skills" (usually at the very bottom). Law school admissions committees love to see distinctive/unusual hobbies and skills.

Use strong action words when describing your roles. Words like "analyzed," "emphasized," and "oversaw" are always going to make your resume sound stronger than more passive verbs.

Make sure the formatting is consistent and that the grammar and spelling is right. Attention-to-detail is a skill that you want to shine through your resume. If you start putting the names of organizations, for instance, in italics, then it has to be in italics throughout the entire document. (I have seen many times in the

same resume a date for one position written as “June 2009 – August 2010,” for instance, and then another written as “Fall 2010 – Spring 2011.”)

Don't be afraid to be different. I encourage my clients to add sections that might not be in a traditional resume if it will more effectively highlight their experiences. I had one client who had been a leader as a student athlete since his freshman year; he included a special section in his resume called “Sports Leadership” in which he listed and explained the different capacities that he had led in throughout his collegiate career. I had another client who had served in two volunteer mission trips abroad; so instead of just listing it as just another activity, she included a section on “International Volunteerism.”

CHAPTER 13

**DEVELOP YOUR PERSONAL BRAND**

Today, more than ever before, we live in an increasingly brand-conscious world. The people who are most successful in their field are those who are able to develop and promote their brand: the law school admissions process is no different. I work with my clients to help them articulate what their personal brand is and market it to admissions committees.

This is one assessment that most experts on law school admissions won't even mention. But this is just another example of how the process has changed because this economy. In previous decades, a

student could hope to be admitted to most of his/her selections if he/she excelled in each of the traditional elements (GPA, LSAT scores, recommendations and extracurricular activities). Today, however, there are just too many applications for too few spots.

Law schools (particularly the most selective ones) are looking for something else in their applicants, in addition to proven success in the traditional elements: they are looking for something special.

**An effective personal brand is something (1) that sets you apart from the crowd, (2) that shows your unique value, and (3) that you can state clearly in one sentence.** If you can fit it on a bump-sticker, even better!

Your ability to find and fine-tune your personal brand is crucial to your success in applying to the most selective schools.



Your personal brand should be what I like to call a “conversation-piece experience”: once you say it, people automatically want to know more. It might be something you do that very few others can or “a common thing that you do uncommonly well” (as H.J. Heinz put it).

Your personal brand might be—and probably is—related to one of the traditional elements (i.e., GPA, LSAT scores, recommendations or extracurricular activities), but it is so exceptional that it can stand alone as its own achievement.

**Your personal brand is the linchpin of your application: the thing that ties everything together.**

My personal brand in the law school admissions process I had served as class president and was about to graduate as valedictorian. This was evident in my

resume; I highlighted it throughout my essays; and those who recommended me included in their letters. I wanted the admissions committee to finish reading my application and say: “Darrell is a leader—on and off campus.” If they didn’t remember anything else, I wanted that undertone to be embedded in their minds.

To articulate what your personal brand is, ask yourself: What is the one thing that I want the admissions committee to know about me when they finish reading my application? Remember, most people forget most of what they hear and see. That’s why you have to focus on the one thing that you want to stick with them above all others.

Your personal brand should be consistent with your overall life-theme, with what makes you unique. (See chapter 13 for more on creating your personal brand.)

Remember Arthur Koestler's words: "The principal mark of genius is not perfection but originality." An admissions counselor in New York City, echoes this sentiment in his advice to applicants: "Feel free. **Be yourself. It's the only marketing device that can really work.**"

**The BIGGEST Mistake Applicants  
Make!!!**

Hands down, this right here is one of the biggest mistakes law school applicants make. The numbers just help your application to get considered, but the students that are getting *accepted* into the most selective schools are those who can best articulate their personal brand (even if they aren't consciously aware that that is what they are doing).

The mistake too many applicants make is by putting all these experiences into their application and not emphasizing anything. So, nothing jumps out. You want the admissions committee to see you as being productive, not just busy.

**You cannot leave it up to the admissions committee to figure out where you are going with your life.** You know *you* better than anyone. Help shape their opinions about you by presenting

yourself as you want to be seen. Leave them with the impression you want them to have!

Use your personal brand to show your value and as a thread to tie together your entire application packet. Ultimately, your personal brand should be reflected in your resume, in your life-theme (which should emerge in your essays), and in your recommendations.

**Your entire application should tell a story—and your personal brand is the short synopsis.**

CHAPTER 14

**MAKE USE OF OPTIONAL ADDENDA**

The harsh reality is that although there are hundreds of law schools across America, **more than half of the tens of thousands of applicants will apply to the same 30 or so.**

The school is definitely in the more favorable position. The best ones are getting their pick of the litter, and each year the bar gets slightly higher.

I am a big fan of using optional addenda to enhance your application. Especially if you know you need scholarship/grant

money, you should definitely make use of the optional addenda. When law schools say “feel free to send us any materials that you think will help us make a decision,” they are really saying “the vast majority of applications are going to look very similar, please help us help you distinguish yourself.”

If you have written a book or a play, I would encourage you to send a copy to your top choices. If you have a website or links to your work online, send that along. I would definitely encourage you to submit any samples of your artistry or news articles that describe something you did in the past if that applies to you. Who knows, this might just be your opportunity to get noticed, far beyond just getting accepted into law school.

I know so many students, especially in this economy, who have created businesses or are involved in side-jobs that generate revenue. You should not shy away from those experiences. I can

think of two of my clients who included a separate essay just detailing their entrepreneurial ventures, and I believe that is what helped them get such a vast amount of grant money (one is now the president of the entrepreneur club at his law school and is starting yet another company).

Bottom line: To stand out, you have to do more. Use the optional addenda to add character to your application. Use the optional addenda to make you unforgettable.



CHAPTER 15

**HOW TO NARROWLY-TAILOR YOUR  
APPLICATION TO YOUR TOP CHOICES**

Although the LSAC electronic system allows you to send the same materials to all of your target schools, I encourage my clients to send specific, tailored materials to—at least—their top three choices. In this economy, you have to be willing to go the extra mile to get noticed.

Schools want your application to reflect that you thought of them specifically. Admissions committees are well aware that you have sent the same materials to several other schools, but they do not want your application to look like it.

This goes to the importance of knowing the school that you are applying to. You have to know the school, so you can know how to approach their specific process. For instance, what might be appealing to a Berkeley admissions committee might push the envelope with a William and Mary audience.

The more you know about a school and its admissions practices, the better prepared you will be to effectively market yourself to them.

If you haven't already, you will definitely hear the term "narrowly-tailor" many times throughout law school, so I thought I'd use it here. You should narrowly-tailor your application for at least your top three choices.

Use a paragraph in your personal statement (and even optional addenda) to give specifics. If you know what major or classes that you would like to take, say

that. If you can identify specific professors or programs that interest you, do so.<sup>3</sup> Show the admissions committee that you know more about their school than what you can see by just browsing their website.

You want the members of the admissions committee to visualize you being at their school. The more specifics you give the better. Place yourself at the scene in their first class so the admissions committee can see you there to.

The last thing you want is for the admissions committee to determine that you are qualified for somebody's law school, just not theirs. You want them to see the value of you attending their law school.

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<sup>3</sup> But be careful because if too many others pick the same ones, it could work against you.

### **If You Know You Need A Scholarship...**

If you know you need a scholarship, then I encourage you to write a specific essay (no more than 400 words) to your top choices. (This only applies to schools where the scholarships are merit-based, as opposed to need-based.) This essay should state your request, what you intend to be in the future, and how the world will benefit as a result.

I know it can be hard to put yourself out there, but this is not the time to be bashful. This reminds me of that proverb: “you have not, because you ask not.” Admissions committees will be impressed by your initiative.

For the record, the focus should not be about getting sympathy or even about why you need the scholarship, but rather

about **why the world needs you to have the scholarship**. When the committee finishes reading your entire application packet, you want them to see why it's in their interest to have you at their school: at that point, trust me, somebody will find the money to get you there.

CHAPTER 16

**MAKE A NETWORKING PLAN**

If it's one thing that I learned throughout my time at Morehouse and Harvard Law School, it's that relationships are everything. You cannot underestimate the power of relationships.

Having grown up in West Baltimore city and in a trailer park in southern Virginia, I also know the importance of getting yourself out there and meeting people.

**It's not who you know: it's who you get to know.**

Not knowing anyone who went to law school when you were growing up is just no longer an excuse in the age of Facebook and Twitter and LinkedIn and every other social network that's out there now.

You would be surprised by how much people want to help. Reach out and send an email or a message and say: "I heard you went to . . . and I would like to go there as well. Do you have any tips?"

Talk to everyone you know you has attended your target schools, and ask them to refer you to others.

Make contact with someone who is working at the school before you apply. This is very important. **If your first interaction with the school is through your application, you are at a huge disadvantage.** Remember what we said in the beginning of the manual about how insular the legal community can be (just

think about the legacy clause that is on most selective schools' applications, particularly the Ivy League): it is super-important that you get yourself out there and make contact with admissions people.

There is no doubt about it: people who know someone who is on the faculty or staff at a particular institution are going to fare better in the process (whether they want to admit it or not). For example, most law schools (particularly the more selective ones) allow their faculty to add internal notes about applicants in their applications. That right there could be what tips the scale in your favor.

You might be thinking, "Well I know anyone and I don't know what to start?" Do what I did. I didn't know anyone who went to law school either.

Start with what's comfortable: reach out to alumni of your college who went to law



school (particularly the ones that interest you).

Then go to the source. Call someone in admissions at your top choices. Sending an email as a follow-up is good, but call first. Introduce yourself and let them know that you are sending in your application. Ask them if it's anyone specific that you should reach out to. That is enough just to get the ball rolling and to start getting your name in people's minds.

Remember, there is still nothing like face-to-face contact. If you are really serious about attending a school, jump on a bus or a train and go visit. Admissions officers are generally very willing to meet with prospective students. One informal conversation in an elevator or lobby could end up being more effective than ten recommendations.

At the end of the day, no matter how prestigious the school might be, admissions officers are people too: appeal to their personal side.

**Ultimately, people invest in people, not ideas.** Make as many connections as you can and foster those relationships because you never know what doors it could open in your life.

## **BELIEVE IT AND RECEIVE IT**

The waiting game is a beast of its own: ironically, you will spend much more time waiting to hear about your application than it takes for you to put it together.

I submitted my applications for law school with the first waves of applicants in early October. I did not get accepted into Harvard Law School until the end of March. That was almost **six months of waiting**—six months of intense pressure, six months of being nagged with that annoying question if I “got in yet,” six months of being told how slim my chances were and watching disparaging reports on the TV about sky-rocketing application rates. Trust me: I know how difficult it is to wait so long to hear about something so

important to you, but I also know how crucial it is that you remain confident while you do.

Patience and positivity throughout the entire process is a must. **Don't sabotage your earlier effort with anxiety and pessimism.**

Application time is stressful enough: you definitely don't need other people's cynicism weighing you down.

Everybody doesn't need to know where you applied. I encourage my clients to operate on a need-to-know basis. Other than the people relevant to your application, no one else really needs to know. This does not mean be secretive, but you do not need the negativity and extra pressure that inevitably comes with sharing your goals with others.

Believe you will receive what you are asking for.

One of my favorite quotes is from Thoreau: “Go confidently in the direction of your dreams.”

Begin to see your life as if you already have the things you want. See yourself at the school you want to go to. See yourself there, taking classes. See yourself graduating with your Juris Doctorate.

Act as if you know you will succeed. I’m not talking about arrogance but rather a sincere, firm confidence that you are going to be what you wish to be. For instance, if you know your target school conducts interviews, begin preparing for it before you are notified whether you will advance to the next round (or perhaps I should say, prepare for *in the confidence* that you will advance to the next round).

See it as already done.

See it as your school and not your “dream school.”

I chose as the subtitle of this guide, “A Step-by-Step into the Law school of Your Dreams,” because I want to take away some of the power from that term. People people throw around the phrase “dream school,” and don’t even realize they are unconsciously making it more difficult for them to attain it.

**As long as you see something as a dream, it will always remain a dream.** I never saw Harvard as my dream school.

Dreams are fantasies. Dreams aren’t about the present and the here-and-now (which makes them seem even more elusive).

Goals, on the other hand, are actionable. Goals bring the future into the present, so you can start doing something about it right now.

I like what a good friend of mine always says: “I don’t have dreams: I only have goals.”

Make your dream of attending the law school of your choice into a goal that you are committed to working towards. See it as yours; believe it is yours; work towards it like it is yours.

DARRELL J. BENNETT

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